

Locked down in distress

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Migrant workers walk on the Mumbai-Pune road near the Shedung toll plaza on Friday, May 8, 2020. (Express Photo: Narendra Vaskar)

The 40-day lockdown was further extended at a time of sporadic expressions of resistance and anger by migrant workers in a few cities. Extreme precarity doesn't have a singular expression. While some are responding with anger, others are responding with resignation. The severe distress among migrant workers in India is not entirely by chance. It has been marinating for a while but the epic new scale has been manufactured due to the unplanned and unilateral decision of a lockdown taken by the prime minister.

The arbitrariness and unpreparedness are evident from the confusing messages from the central government concerning transport for migrants. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issued an order on April 29 permitting inter-state travel for workers who want to return home and instructed the states to appoint nodal officers to develop Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). Thereafter the MHA issued another order on May 1 stating that "passenger movement by trains, except for security purposes or for purposes as permitted by MHA" was to be prohibited. This was followed by another order on May 3, which stated: "it is clarified that the MHA orders are meant to facilitate movement of stranded persons who had moved from their native places/ workplaces, just before the lockdown period..." Through these orders, the MHA has taken refuge in obfuscation.

Notwithstanding the confusing orders, the constant shuffling of travel modes and costs further expose the central government's lack of empathy, thought and planning. We present a highly generous estimate for the total travel cost by trains. If all of 6.5 crore inter-state migrants (Ravi Srivastava's estimate of the number of migrants) were to return, and assuming an average ticket fare of Rs 650, the total travel cost comes to around Rs 4,200 crore. To put this number in perspective, the cost of the Statue of Unity in Gujarat is reportedly Rs 3,000 crore. The PM-Cares as per news reports from early April had Rs 6,500 crore.

The migrant worker distress has also exposed the inherent fractures of the "one nation" narrative that is one of the unique selling propositions of the BJP government. While it goes against the grain of the idea of India that has a rich tradition of pluralism, it is also meaningless from a governance standpoint.

Migrant workers don't carry their ration cards and so haven't been able to avail of government rations in the states where they are stranded. The employers, contractors mostly, have largely abandoned them without paying them wages. Consequently, they are left to scrounge for food and are left without money. In many cases, they are stranded without knowing the local language. In this situation, it is the poorer state governments of Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, etc. that have attempted to seek out "their people" stranded in richer states such as Maharashtra or Haryana and make cash transfers to their account. The economies of these richer states have benefited from the labour of migrants from the poorer states. However, the richer states have neither extended any financial support nor forced employers to pay wages to the workers. Worse still, on May 5, Chief Minister of Karnataka, B S Yediyurappa, cancelled trains for migrant workers from Bengaluru to their home states. The decision was taken after a meeting between the chief minister and the Confederation of Real Estate Developers Associations of India (CREDAI). Neither migrant workers nor trade unions representing them were consulted. This was not only insensitive but a violation of the right to live with dignity (Article 21), right to freedom of movement (Article 19) and prohibition of forced labour (Article 23). The government decided to restore the train services only after protests.



Barring examples from Kerala and Telangana, most host states have demonstrated disregard for migrant workers. It behooves the host states to care about the migrant workers not only from a humanitarian standpoint but also from the perspective of the health of the economy.

On its part, the central government has maintained a calibrated silence regarding this. Monopolising decisions and socialising losses are not what federalism is supposed to mean. Therefore, it is time that the poorer states realise that the unilateral lockdown is not just an assault on the dignity of the poor, but also an economic assault on the poorer state governments. Further, there has been a concerted effort by the central government and some host states to hold the labour captive in the richer states by making transportation procedures unreasonable.

A report by the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) showed that only 6 per cent of the daily wage migrant workers had been paid their full wages during the lockdown and 99 per cent of the self-employed had not earned any income. SWAN, a group of over 100 volunteers who respond to distress calls of the stranded from all over the country, has released two reports. The latest report, released on Labour Day (May 1), focuses on the second phase of lockdown, between April 14 and April 27. The report is not based on a survey but is a compendium of around 17,000 worker testimonies (1,500 labour groups) through which some broad statistics have been calculated.

A petition concerning wages for stranded workers during the lockdown period was being heard in the Supreme Court but was summarily disposed of on April 21. Referring to the plight of migrant workers, the Solicitor General, Tushar Mehta, responding on behalf of the Government of India (GoI) said, “Who told Mr Bhushan that no one is getting anything? There are direct benefit transfer schemes.” Further, referring to the Rs 500 per month transfer to women Jan Dhan Yojana (JDY) account holders, the Principal Economic Advisor, Sanjeev Sanyal recently said: “Of course, we are not going to solve poverty by giving Rs 500... But we are just cushioning the hit so that everyone has some money and some food.”

Distress statistics from SWAN’s report paints a contrary picture. From the 259 persons (out of more than 10,000 workers for whom we have this data) who have availed of cash transfer from governments, only 20 of them received Rs 500 in their JDY accounts. Half of all those who reached out have less than one day of rations left. Around two-thirds have less than Rs 100 left. As one of the traumatised workers said, “I have a one-year-old daughter and a mentally depressed husband. I need to buy medicines for them but I don’t have any cash.”

Besides, do we need the veil of statistics to state the obvious? Don’t we already know that construction workers, domestic workers, sex workers, the homeless, street vendors, and other such people live precarious lives without any safety nets? Let alone an economic lockdown, they lose access to daily wages if they fall sick for even a day. To paraphrase Bob Dylan, Do we need a weatherman to tell us which way the wind blows?

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