

COVID-19, The Lockdown And The Plight Of Migrants: The Reason And The Remedy

NISHANT CHADHA

The root of the present migrant crisis lies in the nature of employment of migrants in cities. They work mostly as daily wagers with uncertain incomes and very little savings. Faced with no income and no social security it makes sense for them now to go back to their villages and the security of MGNREGA. To keep the migrants in our cities, sectors like trade and construction which provide them employment need to be reopened and social security transfers made.

Keywords: COVID-19; Migrant labourers; Lockdown; Social Security; India



Ajoy Ashirwad Mahaprashasta / The Wire

The lockdown in India to prevent the spread of COVID-19 entered its second phase on the 14th of April. On the same day, about 2000 migrants gathered at the railway station in Bandra, Mumbai waiting to board trains back to their homes. The trigger was a rumour that the railways would start special services to ferry migrants home, with the end of, what proved to be the first phase of, the lockdown. What followed was simply a tragedy. Similar protests have been reported from Kerala, Delhi and other states.

Last week the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) said before the Supreme Court (SC) that between 5 lakh to 6 lakh migrants had walked to reach their villages. Many of them had died on the journey home, either due to exhaustion or because of being run over by vehicles.

According to the representation made before the SC, there are more than 10 lakh migrants in relief camps. The government-run shelters have 6.3 lakh and those run by NGOs have over four lakh. The number of active relief camps and shelters of the government is 22,567 and of the NGOs is 3,909.¹ These numbers, in the shelters, are likely to be the lower bound on migrant distress because some slightly more fortunate ones may have found shelter and the means to survive elsewhere.

This plight of the migrants is now as old as the lockdown. A couple of days into the first 21-day lockdown, images of migrant labour taking long treks home or hundreds even thousands of them collecting at bus stops started hitting our screens.

Who are these migrants? And why can't they just stay put as the governments would like them to do? These migrants are people who were living and working, often as daily wagers, in cities and metropolises often thousands of miles away from their hometowns or in most cases home villages. As such these migrants lead precarious economic lives. And as the economy ground to an unprecedented standstill, lakhs of such people are (and have been) fighting to get home.

Are these scenes so surprising though?

Two features of the Indian labour market should alert us to the fact that what is happening is not unexpected. The first is the precariousness of the incomes of a majority of people working in urban India. According to the Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017-18 survey, 28.25% of people in the labour force in urban areas are self-employed, i.e., they own and operate their establishments; while 5.25% are unpaid family help in household enterprise. 13.24% are casual labour while 7.8% are unemployed. This means that about 47% of the people in the labour force are daily wage labour and 55% are either in daily wage or unemployed. Thus a majority of the urban labour force faces very uncertain incomes.

¹ <https://www.news18.com/news/india/impatient-starving-angry-as-india-battles-pandemic-stranded-migrant-workers-emerge-as-crisis-in-the-making-2578109.html>

Not only this, their incomes are low and most of them are spent on surviving. Any savings are miniscule and these savings are meant for serious economic shocks like adverse health incidents. This leaves them extremely vulnerable to any income shocks, and this present shutdown is the worst shock that one could imagine.

But still, why such a large exodus? That is because our cities are run by migrant labour. Good data on migration in India is hard to get and collected only at long intervals. Moreover, migration in India is divided into two streams, permanent migration and shorter-term seasonal migration. Seasonal migrants typically move from rural to urban areas for short durations in the lean agricultural season. This makes it even more difficult to correctly estimate their numbers. But estimates suggest such movements to be in the range of 5 crore (Srivastava, 2011). Seasonal migrants almost by definition end up self-employed or in casual wage labour, since they do not spend enough time in one place to engage in long term employment. Migrants also remit any miniscule savings they may have to their families in their villages. This leaves them extremely vulnerable in their places of work.

Add to this the fact that while India actually has a good social security net for the rural poor in the form of MGNREGA but almost none for the urban poor, mostly self-employed or working as casual labour. This vast army of workers who keep our cities running is thus making the sensible choice of moving to a place where they do have access to social security. Their villages. Where the MGNREGA promises them some relief. And the costs of living are also not astronomically high as they tend to be in metropolises.

We should not thus be surprised by the images presented to us.

Could this have been anticipated?

In fact the government could and should have learnt its lesson from the grand and painful experiment it did about three and a half years ago. In a study we carried out at the India Development Foundation (IDF) after demonetisation we found that the immediate effect of demonetisation on the informal sector could be summarised in the following – people lost jobs in the immediate aftermath, slums and bastis emptied out as people left for their villages and this was followed by increased demand for MGNREGA work in villages.² This observation from our survey is corroborated by the publicly available data from the MGNREGA scheme.

² https://www.idfresearch.org/uploads/R_a_c_e/1546941125_7201701304321.pdf

The above chain of reactions to a massive economic shock sounds very reasonable and logical and hence deducible before the fact. It should have hardly come as a surprise. But it is possible that the suddenness of the COVID epidemic forced the governments' hand making it move for a shut down before it could plan for the massive exodus of people from our cities.

What should be done now?

Ever since the crisis surfaced governments and well-meaning citizens and organisations have been trying to provide food and basic necessities in migrant shelters. But the scale of the problem and inefficiencies in dealing with a crisis in the lockdown has meant these efforts are not proving nearly enough. A survey of migrant workers by NGO Jan Sahas found that four out of 10 labourers did not have ration left even for one day and 90 per cent had lost their only source of income over the past three weeks due to the lockdown.³

A possible solution, already hinted at by some, is to transport them to their home states and districts in a planned and controlled way (perhaps using dedicated trains and/or buses).⁴ Quarantine them there, in one or multiple locations, for 14 days and then let those that are not infected travel on to their villages, again in a supervised way. This reduces the problem into manageable sizes for each state government and local authority. But this will require coordination between state governments and between the central and state governments, something that has been missing in recent times, but let us hope that the current crisis has changed that.

However, the central government does not seem to be too keen on mass movements at this time. Is there a solution that keeps the migrants where they are?

The answer may lie the sectors in which migrants work and what sectors could be opened to some economic activity. According to the PLFS, the sectors that employ the most casual labour or self-employed (and hence those in which one might expect a higher concentration of migrants) are Construction (16 % self-employed and 70% casual labour), Agriculture (65% self-employed and 30% casual labour), Trade (65% self-employed and 5% casual labour), Transport (45.2 self-employed and 11% casual labour), Accommodation and food services (53% self-employed and 11% casual labour). Manufacturing, while providing self-employment and casual labour has

³ <https://www.news18.com/news/india/impatient-starving-angry-as-india-battles-pandemic-stranded-migrant-workers-emerge-as-crisis-in-the-making-2578109.html>

⁴ <https://twitter.com/AUThackeray/status/1250064774584557568>

half its employment in regular and wage salary earners. Thus to keep migrants in cities it is imperative that sectors like Construction and Trade be opened up gradually.

This however won't be enough. The uncertainty from COVID-19 is here to stay for the near future. Hence simply the promise of possible employment will not be enough to keep migrant labour in the city. Social security perhaps as direct benefit transfers will also be required to counter the incentives provided by MGNREGA to prevent a mass exodus.