

An Issue of Lives Versus Livelihoods*

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That the situations faced by India's migrants are not a matter of concern in policy making is quite apparent

Strict to moderate lockdowns are being imposed again, this time in April 2021, terminating jobs in many an establishment employing large numbers of informal workers.

Of those employed in the informal category, large numbers include migrants who face, like they did in March-April of 2020, a bleak future, with job losses, loss of rented accommodations, a lack of sustainable income and savings to ensure food and transportation back to villages or address any other emergency including falling victim to COVID-19.

Grim to grimmer

Given their bitter experiences last year, migrants have already begun their journeys back to villages, paying exorbitant sums for their travel. Of course, no bright prospect awaits them there given the state of rural distress which initially pushed them to seek better prospects in the urban areas. Nor do they expect new job opportunities, especially given shrinking National Rural Employment Guarantee Act allotments by the government.

The continuing exodus is unofficially estimated upward of 4 lakh for Western Railway between April 1 and 12, while the Central Railways transported back 4.7 lakh migrants, all from Maharashtra, over the last few weeks. Such journeys will be recorded in history as those of destitution, offering limited prospects of a better state.

With multiple issues of serious sufferings on account of COVID-19- related distress, the country has less time to discuss the fate of these unwanted migrants on their path of reverse migration, fleeing from centres of livelihood toward dark holes of rural helplessness and poverty. To provide a narrative of who these people are, we may describe them as 'mobile by default', with growing rural distress and inadequate official policies failing to support the ailing rural economy.

In a mirror image of the previous tragedy in 2020, this unwanted trek back to where they came from provides them no future worth mentioning. The conditions faced by these workers under a 'curfew-to-lockdown' status include the immediate termination of their livelihoods in terms of jobs, access to accommodation and near insolvency.

That the situations faced by migrants are not a matter of concern in policy making is quite apparent. There has been no attempt to have an official estimate of such flows, either incoming or reverse. Nor has any thought, going by official announcements, been given to redress the miseries that await the returning migrants. The recent official announcement of free ration of 5 kg cereals to 80 crore families is the only sop visible so far.

Questions for the state

Questions abound. It may not be too far-fetched to ask if this measure of using lockdowns and curfews to save lives also, simultaneously, takes away the means of livelihood for the rootless and roofless migrants. If so, what are the measures the state has offered even to redress to a degree their sufferings? Would it not have been more fair to provide for some short-term relief for these workers and their families not wanted any more in the urban areas?

One can count the impact on urban centres. The flow provided a reserve army of cheap labour waiting to be hired at wages which, often, could dip lower than the statutory minimum, especially after meeting the demands of the mediating contractor who arranged for the migration from villages. With the formal organised industry employing as many as one half or more of employees with casual or informal status, it proved rather opportune for enterprises in factories, construction sites and other labour-intensive activities to make use of these migrants in their cost-cutting exercises. On the whole, the presence of the rural migrants benefited the urban economy by providing cheap labour to manufacturing units and cheap services to households. However, these jobs did not entail further obligations on the part of the employers or the state, given that the ‘footloose’ migrants never had any legal status as a working population.

No labour safeguards

One last question. Has there been any attempt ever to ensure some legal safeguards for these people? Pieces of legislation, as available, do not provide any evidence of addressing the issue especially in the current crisis—a pattern indicative of a minimalist state with close alliances with capital.

The Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act 1970 conferred on casual labour a legal status by providing a mechanism for registration of contractors engaging 20 or more workers. While it was never effective, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code, 2020 has replaced all such Acts. Seeking, rather ineffectively, to regulate the health and safety conditions of workers in establishments with 10 or more workers, the Code has replaced 13 prevailing labour laws.

One can raise questions as to what happened to the various laws still operative. It is thus more than obvious that none of the so-called corrective measures were of any significance in relation to what the migrants have been experiencing since partial or total lockdowns have been imposed over the last few weeks.

Can we justify the situation as a step to save lives when it does not work for large sections of migrant people who also experience a loss of their livelihoods at the same time? Could there be some safeguards for such people before sending them off to such a bleak future?

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