

Corona Pandemic, Sudden Visibility of Migrant Workers and the Indian Economy

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The outbreak of the Novel Corona Virus pandemic has brought to the fore the fact that the Indian economy is run to a large extent, if not to the largest extent, by the inter-state migrant workers. One report has in recent time claimed that approximately India's 100 million migrant workers are responsible for 10 per cent of annual GDP of India.¹ We are not sure whether exactly there are 100 million inter-state migrant workers in India or more than that. The official statistics in this regard is quite dated which puts the number of migrant workers in India at 139 million.² Newspaper reports both in English dailies and vernaculars following the outbreak of the pandemic and announcement of lockdown by the Union Government have reported that there are more than this number of migrant workers in India. If we take these reports to be correct in the absence of any latest official data then the contribution of the internal migrant workers in Indian economy will be more than 10 per cent of her GDP annually. Let us for our purpose stick to the Census data of 2011. If the population growth is say 1.4 per cent per annum since 2011³ then at present the number of internal migrant workers would be much more than 139 million. A recent statement by the Union Labour Minister put the figure at 80 million when the Minister stated that migrant workers' crisis which has surfaced due to the crisis involves 80 million migrant workers in India.⁴ This in other words may mean two things – either the Union Government is making a rough estimate that there are at present 80 million internal migrant workers or more than 50% of the internal migrant workers in India are at present affected by the crisis. In a country of 1.3 billion population even 80 million is not at all a small figure to count with. What is worth noticing is the fact that the Government does not have any official data of inter-state migrant workers which run the India economy!⁵ Nor does there any interest to collect the numbers even at the time of the crisis. This is quite unfortunate. Because taking clue from Marx, one can say these workers are the major creators of discretionary wealth in India in terms of performing surplus labour and thereby, producing surplus value in the capitalist enterprises (large or medium or small). Of course, not all of them are performers of surplus labour as some are occupying subsumed class positions providing the conditions of existence to the different class enterprises including the capitalist ones. Either way these labourers are perpetrators of surplus which adds to the discretionary wealth of the few (productive and unproductive capitalists as well as rentier class like). The way the migrant workers' crisis surfaced after the lockdown was announced on 24th March 2020 by the Prime Minister shows that both the governments (Union as well as State Governments) and also, to a large extent the official professionals responsible in this matter remained unaware of the fact that the Indian economy is run by her internal migrant workers who have left their home in an unsecured manner to earn their bread and butter!

Till the pandemic these migrant workers remained invisible to us. Except few labour experts like Jan Bremen we hardly paid any attention to the socio-economic plight of these internal migrant workers. The Corona pandemic has created a crisis for them and thereby, all on a sudden they have become visible to us including the print and electronic media. And this visibility has brought to

the fore the problem whose nature is both economic as well as political and demands some humanitarian attention which so far is missing from the state apparatus except few voluntary organizations and social activists who are dealing with them.

This paper is an attempt to understand the crisis that the migrant workers are encountering every moment in the post-lockdown period and also, to understand the nature of the Indian economy and the policy response (both from the Union and different State Governments) to deal with the crisis. The paper proceeds as follows. The very first section will try to explore the migrants' economy in India as has been shaped since 1947 – especially since the inception of the economic reforms in 1991. The migrant crisis as it has evolved can only be comparable to the crises which afflicted the periodic famine-ridden commonplace in the colonial period and hence, its nature is more than simple economic one – rather, one which is best described as *humanitarian*. The second section of the paper will delve into the nature of the present migrant crisis – the features of it as a *humanitarian* crisis. A crisis which is humanitarian warrants a humane approach to cope with it. Here comes the question of ethics and care. And the question of ethics and care in this respect goes beyond “normal” *self-interest* centric understanding of an individual as is propounded in this neoliberal age under the garb of what is dubbed as *homo-economicus*. Why it is so will be discussed in the following section of the paper along with disinterring the post-Covid policy responses of the Indian state. Lastly, we will make an engagement with a vision of the Indian Economy at large which include the migrants in the post-Covid scenario. This is due to the fact that everything will not remain the same in the post-Corona period for the Indian Economy as well as for the World Economy. If the economies continue to be guided by the same profit motive and through the market with minimalist state as before some more harsh conditions of existence will probably be there for the migrants in particular and the labourers in general in the days to come. Or will there be an alternative to it – an alternative political along with an alternative economic with Democracy at Work? The whole debate has to be organized taking both economic and political together as we often forget that economic and political mutually constitute each other in Althusserian logic of overdetermination⁶. Once again the question is whether this debate will be allowed to be there by the neoliberal state? Whether the labour resistance will come to fore for a better alternative, for a better future to come for all the commonplace? The pandemic along with making the migrants, who are cog in the wheel in Polanyian sense, visible has also foregrounded the question of alternative which like the migrants remained so far foreclosed by the (neoliberal) state in particular and global capitalism in general. This is once again a question of ethical justice and care which so far does not have any voice representation. Of course, here too the justice and associated care must break the (neo)liberal norm and goes beyond it. The question is how and in which direction? So, the migrants' crisis is simply not now the crisis of the internal migrants.⁷ It is a crisis, as the Corona pandemic has foregrounded, for the entire Indian economy, polity and society. The most glaring fact of the time is the fact following Thomas Pickety, that a formidable section of the direct producers of the soil (in the form of migrant workers) are falling prey to the crisis (even expiring in the roads on their way back to home) when India has already produced some sizeable number of billionaires – some of whose total wealth and/or annual income surpass the net state domestic products of some states, if not the GDP of India!

Section 1: Migrants and the Indian Economy:

Of the total workforce, only 7 per cent is employed in the organized sector of the Indian economy and the remaining 93 per cent in the informal sector. A large share of the total workforce (taking formal and informal sector together) is migrant workers. This migration is from rural to urban areas, urban to urban areas and rural to rural areas. Also, the source of the internal migration is mostly from the Northern and Eastern States of India including UP, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand and Assam. As mentioned above, there is no official statistics regarding the total number of migrant workers in India internally, their source of migration and also, their destination of migration. The destination of the migrants includes the following States – Maharashtra, Gujarat, Delhi, Haryana, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Tamil Nadu mainly as reported by the media after the lockdown following the outbreak of Corona pandemic.

These migrant workers are engaged in formal and informal manufacturing enterprises (large, medium and small), formal and informal services including hotels and related activities, in logistics including transport sector and a large chunk is absorbed in the construction activities. A good number of these migrant workers is self-employed as street-vendors, home-based workers and workers engaged in productive household activity such dairying/livestock.⁸ The noticeable features of these migrant workers are the following:

- (a) They are subject to informalization which not only means they are in the informal sector but also within the formal sector they work mostly as contract or temporary workers (not as regular permanent workers).
- (b) Given (a) above, these migrant workers are not at all subject to the standard labour laws of the country. There are two labour laws – one is the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970 and the other one is The Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1979. All the contract and/or migrant workers can be subject to these two laws but till the date the effective utilization of these two labour laws has not been witnessed although these two laws are not adequate/sufficient to address the problems of the contract workers and the migrant workers.
- (c) Another feature of the migrant workers is that many of these migrant workers are actually *footloose workers* (the term as used by Jan Bremen⁹) with no stable destination. They move from one urban point to another continuously in search of livelihood. This is true for the migrant workers who generally work in the construction and logistic activities.
- (d) Since the migrant workers are bereft of any labour laws to protect them they are mostly without any social security benefit. Although their life they live mainly on daily earnings and thereby, remain always in hand-to-mouth condition as the post-lockdown period shows.
- (e) Many of these migrant workers have left their families in their rural homeland from where they migrated although some moved with their family as the study by Bandyopadhyay (2020) with regard to the migrant workers from UP and Bihar in Chandigarh region indicates.¹⁰

The migrant workers as claimed above contributes at least 10% of GDP of India. However, before the outbreak of the Corona pandemic they remained foreclosed and even when the

lockdown was announced on 24th March 2020 their presence in their places of work remained totally invisible or foreclosed before our eyes. We can divide these internal migrants in two categories in Marxian sense. In one category belongs those workers who are performers of surplus labour¹¹ in various class processes¹² including the capitalist ones. Surplus labour performed in capitalist class processes gets converted into surplus value through market exchange. The other category of workers occupies subsumed class positions¹³ and various other non-capitalist class processes including those who are self-employed. In fact, the latter category is a huge one in India as almost 51 per cent of total labourforce in India in 2013 is self-employed.¹⁴ There is no official statistics regarding what is the percentage share of internal migrant workers in total self-employed in India. So, one type of migrant workers are creators of discretionary wealth in the society as performers of surplus labour including surplus value. The other category of workers does not perform surplus labour but they too help in creating wealth indirectly by providing necessary conditions of existence to the different Fundamental Class Processes where surplus is produced. So, we can claim that a significant percentage of wealth created in Indian economy every year is generated by the internal migrant workers. But in return they are mostly not subject to minimum wage regulations, and hardly receives any social security benefits. The variable capital their labour power represents remains depressed and they bear the risk of all types which capital forces on them. Labour is the risk bearing factor¹⁵ in this neoliberal age of global capitalism and the migrant labour is no exception here. In fact, as the crises of global capitalism have shown that labour bears the risk to save the capital. Even the social cost of capitalism as it is unfurled during this Corona pandemic is too being borne by the labour – especially those who are migrants and footloose.

The presence of so much migrant workers in the working of the Indian economy can be traced to the colonial time. We are not going to touch upon that. However, since the inception of neoliberal economic reform in 1991 the informalization and concomitant migration to the urban pockets of some parts of India have gone. This migration can best be described as forced migration or involuntary migration. There are cases in neoliberal India which indicate labour is displaced and dislocated from his/her means of subsistence (if not, from means of his/her subsistent production) in rural areas. The uprooted labour in search of alternative livelihood has no other option but to migrate wherever they can and at whatever (monetary) return they can manage to get. This has helped shaping the capitalist economy of India in this neoliberal time by bringing down the price of labour. As shown by Dasgupta (2019), since 1985-86 labour share in India's formal manufacturing sector has been taking downward turn implying widening gap between labour productivity and real wage.¹⁶ If this is the scenario in the formal manufacturing of India, one can easily imagine the situation in the informal economy and other segments of the formal sector would be more acute and anti-labour and the most drastic burden befalls on the migrant workers of the Indian economy who are significant creators of national wealth which is owned by a few productive and unproductive capitalists as the increasing income and wealth inequality in recent time (of neoliberal reform) exhibits.¹⁷ So, while the rate of surplus value went on rising limitlessly (both as absolute surplus value and relative surplus value) the capital succeeded in depressing the real value of labour.

All these issues pertaining to migrant workers have become of immense relevance with the upsurge of the pandemic and the lockdown thereupon. Till the upsurge these migrants were totally invisible (which may be described as one classic instance of commodity fetishism as propounded by Marx) but they are suddenly visible at the time of crisis – especially a crisis which is related with the question of public health. This reminds us what Frederick Engels asserted almost 150 years back that “workers become visible when they become a threat to public health”.¹⁸ So, the sudden visibility of the migrants who are major builder of the neoliberal Indian economy is because they pose a catastrophic threat in terms of public health to the Indian society and hence, the crisis. And it is something to do with the conditions of (migrant) working class in India (but nobody bothers about it) which even today resembles what Frederick Engels observed about the conditions of working class in England in 1845.¹⁹ The current pandemic has made the migrants visible suddenly and hence, the crisis. It is crisis of public health. Crisis of migrants. And crisis of the Indian economy. Either way in all these three dimensions of crisis migrants for the first time are at the focus of our attention which is nothing to do with their actual conditions of living (as hardly anyone including the Indian state has bothered about it) but something to do with the social cost in terms of ensuring public health and hygiene as the present time demands and who knows whether capital also demands it!

Section 2: Migrants’ Crisis:

The Corona pandemic and associated lockdown since 25th March 2020, as observed above, has engendered three pronged crisis for the Indian society – (1) public health crisis, (2) migrants crisis and (3) crisis for the Indian economy in terms of prolonged recession (which started since 2017 and is accentuated by the present lockdown following Corona pandemic). We may add to these a fourth one which is institutional crisis in India in terms of policy responses and associated institutional mechanism to cope with the Corona pandemic on one hand and the recession and migrant workers on the other hand. We will deal with this last issue at length in the ensuing section of this paper.

The crisis of public health is now well-known as the pandemic has exhibited so far. So, we will not touch upon this issue here in details. The only point we would drive home in this regard is the fact that like migrant workers lack of adequate public health mechanism suddenly has become visible or has become foregrounded which the Indian state never bothered about. The exception in this respect is the Indian State of Kerala which has vindicated how significant an apt and adequate public health infrastructure and mechanism should be when safe public health becomes at stake due to an epidemic.

Till the time the migrants on their own decided to go back to their home in the lockdown period the state apparatus paid little heed to their problem. Even when the lockdown was announced on 24th March 2020, the Indian state represented by the current Union Government did not take into account the appalling plight to which these migrants would be subject to when the shutter is down for all activities including the economic ones on which their lifeforms crucially depend. The state got waken up when the stories of migrants literally walking some 500 or more kilometers towards their home started appearing in the print and electronic media. By that time the crisis of the migrant workers reached at its peak as most of them lost their meagre daily earnings rendering them penniless, many of them could hardly manage any meal a day, mostly became roofless as they

failed to pay the house rent. The situation reached a point that before Corona attacks them, they would die physically out of starvation and mental anxiety being resourceless. Even they did not have the money to purchase the train tickets. And hence, they started for their home on feet knowing very well that they have to walk miles after miles to reach their destination sans any food and shelter and also, sans any public health precautionary measures. Various stories about the migrant workers' return journey to their home are now available in the media which only confirms our claim in this paper that they are now suddenly visible in post-colonial India,²⁰ which was not the case earlier. So, the pandemic has posed a great threat to the lives and living condition of the migrant workers and in this sense, it is to us *migrants' crisis*.

Thirdly, the pandemic has posed a crisis for the whole Indian economy which was anyway under ventilation before the lockdown since 2017. The lockdown has intensified the crisis as the experts have predicted sharp fall in the economic growth rate. The international credit rating agencies already downgraded India's rating with a pessimistic prediction. The rate of unemployment as reported in the media in recent time has shot up (if not at its all time high in the post-independent period). The problem may be ascribed to lack of effective demand in the economy. The demand in the Indian economy stems from mainly three sources – consumption (both private and government), exports and investment. Due to slowdown in the world economy and also, because of the pandemic there is rarely any chance in near future that export demand will revive. The export demand came to standstill in the post-2008 global crisis. The private consumption demand is waning and with labour losing their earnings with lockdown it is not going to rise. Similar is the case with government consumption. In fact, the Union Government has already announced that except two projects no government schemes will be in vogue in the current fiscal year. Investment demand depends on the prospects of business which in turn hinges upon the expected rise in consumption demand. So, it is quite unlikely that investment will get boost in the post-lockdown period immediately. The economic crisis has adversely affected the migrants like other workers with migrants' plight becoming more appalling being food-less, shelter-less and security-less.

If we closely look at these three crises in the context of Corona pandemic viz. public health, migrants and the Indian economy we will find in all these migrants' crisis has both contributed to other two crises and also, get afflicted by the other two crises. This is not to say only migrants are the lone sufferer in this crisis. They are at the receiving end of this crisis as other workers are as the ultimate risk-bearers of these three crises including the social cost of lockdown. But their sudden visibility has posed a problem to the “liberal democratic” of the Indian state and they pose a threat to the society as the pandemic unfurls.

Section 3: Policy Responses, Ethics and Care:

The nature of the migrants' crisis can best be described as a humanitarian crisis which goes beyond the simple economic crisis. And here comes the question of ethics in policy framing and also, care for the migrant workers and their families. We have already stories of migrant workers walking with their paltry belongings for their home thousand kilometers away from their places of work and some even died on the road or in the *shramik special* (labour special) trains. In fact, almost every day since 8th May 2020 migrants died or killed in road accident on their way back to home since the Aurangabad train tragedy²¹.

It is the question of bare living of the migrants in this Corona lockdown phase which is concerned with their access to food, shelter and earning their means of subsistence. The crisis confronting the migrant is therefore humanitarian one and thereby warrants certain ethical norms and care for them from the Indian state. A humanitarian crisis is one which threatens life of a large mass of people in a country or in a region in terms of their health, safety and well-being and like. It may be caused by natural disaster, wars, internal conflicts and epidemic and like.²² In the current context, it is the Corona pandemic for which there is now humanitarian crisis encountered by the migrant workers in India. “India is in the grip of a humanitarian crisis. And continuing the coronavirus disease (Covid-19)-sparked national lockdown will be an unmitigated disaster”²³. The same is reported as “unfolding humanitarian crisis” by Stranded Workers Action Network in the media.²⁴

A humanitarian crisis always warrants ethical justice for the crisis-prone subjects and also, it demands care for them as it is in the case of internal or external refugees. Apart from the problem faced by the migrants amid lockdown they also do not know the exact procedures which they have to follow to reach home during lockdown and this further accentuates their distress in the current situation.²⁵

It can be said that one of the major ethical principles at the time of a humanitarian crisis is to reach the affected subject as early as possible with non-impartiality (in political sense of the term) and also with beneficence. And with this comes the question of care – quality care in terms of providing services such as food aid, shelter, water and sanitation, security and basic health services when humanitarian crisis breaks out. The question therefore remains what sort of ethical justice and (quality) care the migrants have received so far from the Indian state? What are the nature of policy response of the Government? What actions so far, the Government has taken in response to this humanitarian crisis facing the large milieu of migrant workers of India – the creator of discretionary wealth of the nation?

The Union Government came out with an economic package to cope with the economic crisis following the outbreak of the Corona pandemic. As claimed by the Government the total value of the said package stands at Rs. 20 lakh crore which is supposedly 10 per cent of India’s GDP. The components of the package includes increase in MGNREGA allocation, viability gap funding for social infrastructure, allocation for agriculture and allied activities, allocation for migrants and farmers, allocation for MSMEs and NBFCs, welfare and health and this entire economic package also includes the package announced earlier by the RBI. As many authors²⁶ have already indicated most of these measures are supply-sided in nature as they are in the form of loans at the time of crisis (and hence, not direct money transfer to the crisis affected subjects) and therefore, in actual term the value of the total package is much less than what is claimed. Further, it is doubtful whether these measures will be effective in boosting demand in the economy without which the current slowdown of the Indian economy may not be reversed. What is most disturbing is the fact there is no coherent policy or package just for the migrant workers except the announcement of providing them free ration for six months, which is perhaps not enough given the nature of the crisis. There is no measure to ensure for them the following – (a) job, (b) social security benefits as citizens of India, (c) access to quality food, (d) access to proper shelter, and (e) free health services. The list

is not exhaustive, but these are the bare necessity which an individual migrant worker and his/her family requires for bare quality living at and after this time of crisis.

If we chronologically look at the action taken by the Union Government since the declaration of Corona as an pandemic by WHO on 11th March 2020 we would find migrants as a subject rarely found any place in them except some tit bit response as soon as they became suddenly visible along the road on their feet.

First of all, before the announcement of lockdown the Indian Government took step to bring back the Indians by air from abroad. Secondly, there was a gap between Janata Curfew on 22nd March 2020 and the formal announcement of lockdown on 24th March 2020. No step was taken to send back the migrant workers to their home from different states where they were working. Was the Government aware at all these workers would be pauperized totally during the lockdown and they also need care and food and money?

Thirdly, the policy measures that the Government announced in the month of May 2020 were mostly neoliberal economic reforms measures through backdoor. The classic example is the reform in the Essential Commodities Act and also, in the area of agricultural marketing. Moreover, on 27th March 2020 Rs. 68,000 crores of non-performing debts of almost 50 millionaires cum industrialists was written off by the RBI and at a time when the country was reeling under deep recession and migrant workers were dying on the roads.

Fourthly, in some states like UP and Madhya Pradesh the working time of the labour was extended from eight hours to twelve hours a day diluting the existing labour laws. And the concerned workers were denied the overtime benefits as per the existing labour law of the land. This is a classic example of increasing relative surplus value and also, rate of surplus value and as a result, the hourly wage of a labourer would come down from what it was before the lockdown. Labour laws of various kinds which used to protect the interest of the working class in general have been suspended by some states including the minimum wage requirement and like. The easy exit policy is now in vogue in these states *de jure* although for contract workers (which include the migrants) it was *de facto* since the economic reform began.

Fifthly, the Government took certain steps to send the migrants off to their home by arranging what is called shramik special (labour special) trains from 1st May 2020 more than one month after the announcement of lockdown. And this step was taken by the Government the moment the sudden visibility of the migrant workers on roads became a news in the media and not before that. The condition to which the migrant workers were subjected to in these trains barely speaks about ethics and care for them by the state. In many trains food and water were not available in adequate quantity with the quality of food being in question. Moreover, the social distancing norm of the Corona lockdown was violated creating great public health threat. What is most striking is the fact that Railway ministry never transported these workers free of cost.²⁷ So, many could not board these trains as they did not have the money to purchase the train tickets. Sometimes the migrant workers problems and their sudden visibility were considered as a law and order problem. In places like Mumbai and Surat police lathi charged to disperse the migrant folk who assembled on the road in an expectation of getting trains to go back home. So, the question of ethics and care for a

humanitarian crisis remained at stake sometime as the events unfolded in various urban areas with large population of migrant workers.

That the Government is not much aware of the existence of such a large number of migrant workers in the country is discernible from the fact perhaps that till the time of sudden visibility of them on the roads no action or measure was adopted to safeguard migrants' interest. Even when some measure was adopted it was very piecemeal approach, not a full-hearted one (as the present humanitarian crisis demands) as the case of *shramik special* trains indicates. There was not much willingness either from the side of the Indian state to know the exact magnitude of migrant workers and their crisis in the country. This is discernible from the fact that the Government did not bother to effectively utilize the Inter-state Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, which was framed in 1979 to prevent exploitation of inter-state migrant workers, protect their rights and create a database of transient migrant labourers. Very recently the National Human Rights Commission in an intervention application to the Supreme Court opined that the migrants' workers crisis might have been averted had this particular law been used by the Government.²⁸ In fact, using this law the official database of the migrant workers could have been created.

Further, most of the migrant workers (whether they are performers of surplus labour/value or they occupy subsumed class positions) are contract labour. In this regard to the very Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act of 1970 was never taken recourse to protect the interest of the contract workers and thereby also, that of the migrant workers in India.

What therefore we see in the name of protecting the commonplace through policy measures and other declared action by the Government there is backdoor neoliberal reform which include the deregulation of the labour laws by making labour as much flexible as possible as per the demand of the (domestic as well as global) capital. India is a country of cheap labour. The cheapness of labour makes her destitute and pauper on the one hand and on the other, subsidizes the capital – domestic as well as global. And migrant workers are no exception in this regard being the risk-bearer of the economic crisis as well as the Corona pandemic crisis. So, it is better not to talk about ethics and care for them! It is not the inhuman plight of the migrants which is the concern of the state; rather, it is the profit and accumulation of wealth perhaps which concerns most the neoliberal state.

Section 4: In Search of An Alternative:

The present crisis in the Indian economy ex-post Corona lockdown – especially with respect to the humanitarian crisis of the migrant jobless workers in a way poses a challenge to the “normal” working of the economy where the standard of “normal” is set up in terms of the neoliberal economic order and the global capitalism. The Corona pandemic has deepened the crisis of capitalism in the world and in India too. However, the question is whether this crisis of capitalism as far as working class in general and the migrant class in particular are concerned will bring to the fore the debate for an alternative order. If yes, then the question is which alternative order? Will it be an alternative to end labour exploitation? Or will it be an alternative of reformulated

capitalism (for example, as Keynes wanted at the time of Great Depression). Or will it be an alternative in terms of more market-centric anti-labour neoliberal reform?

What turn the future takes in terms of alternative in the post-Corona phase will in any way bring to the fore question of political – especially in the country like India with liberal democratic polity. The political will in doubt shape the course of alternative. But at the same time the political will be formed by the contradictory frictions of different alternatives. Gone are the days of voice representation of labour. And this now badly shows why does trade union matter? Will the political bring back the voice of labour – that of the migrants in particular? Or will the political divide the voice of migrants and working class in terms of caste, race, religion and like to name a few?

At least three possibilities are there for post-Corona time. They are as delineated above as (a) intensification of market-centric reforms in the name of economic rescue package (which the Union Government has already started), (b) reforming the (global) capitalist regime with direct state control and intervention in Keynesian lines (which is quite impossible in the current neoliberal world order), and (c) an alternative to capitalist order and hegemony itself. If it is (c) then how and in which direction? Will it render end of labour exploitation in creating space for democracy within the economic space?²⁹

Let us posit the case of the migrant workers in terms of these three alternatives.³⁰ In case (a), the more intensification of market-centric neoliberal economic reforms – especially in favour of more flexible labour regime – would signify harder times for the migrants in particular and the working class in general. Already we have seen there is a tendency for this in terms of diluting the existing labour laws implying generation of more surplus in absolute as well as relative sense *a la* Marx. That is then not a trend towards ending labour exploitation – rather its diametric opposite. It signifies (as the lengthening of the working hour indicates) depression of even minimum wage of labourer (since overtime regulation is diluted) and for migrants without any social security this implies accentuation of hand-to-mouth plight further. In case (b), one may expect a return of the welfare state in Keynesian terms as was the case in the Golden Days of Capitalism in the immediate post-World War II era. Migrants may get a better deal in terms of some social security benefits and minimum wage guarantee. However, for this to happen there is a need for internal change within capitalist order. Otherwise, this reformulation of capitalism as Keynes wanted is difficult. But the way the neoliberal wind is blowing all over the world despite its periodic crisis (and this time with a pandemic) it seems quite impossible to happen. Gone are the days of New Deal perhaps! If it is (c), then the question is what type of paradigmatic change it will take? The migrants are safest perhaps and so is the general well-being of commonplace in (c). Capital will not allow it perhaps. It all depends on the political – the political of labour resistance. For that matter it hinges crucially on the voice of the migrants as they constitute now the large share of the total workforce in India.

Frederick Engels 175 years ago in the context of the conditions of the working class and its movements in England opined: “It must be admitted, even if I had not proved it so often in detail, that the English workers cannot feel happy in this condition; that theirs is not a state in which a man or a whole class of men can think, feel, and live as human beings. The workers must therefore strive to escape from this brutalising condition, to secure for themselves a better, more human

position; and this they cannot do without attacking the interest of the bourgeoisie which consists in exploiting them. But the bourgeoisie defends its interests with all the power placed at its disposal by wealth and the might of the State. In proportion as the working-man determines to alter the present state of things, the bourgeois becomes his avowed enemy.”³¹ In the context of current migrants crisis the same can be said that without attacking the interest of capital the plight of the migrants cannot be lifted to a humane living. All that depends on the political. Is India ready for that?

In Lieu of A Conclusion:

The migrants sudden visibility has no doubt posed a problem for the liberal democratic polity of India. And as the migrants’ crisis unfolded some tit bit measures were adopted. But in a humanitarian crisis like this there is not much response from the state in terms of ethics and care which the migrants warrant at this hour. The migrants’ crisis is inter-twinned with the public health crisis and also, with the crisis of the Indian economy. Migrants remain as the most vulnerable section of the working class while they bear all sorts of risk emanated from this pandemic and concomitant lockdown and also bears the social costs (which should have been taken care of by the state and its agencies).

We wait for the post-Corona phase. And we are eagerly waiting to see what happens to then? What turn the political takes and how the economy is reshaped? But all that will depend on the hundred dollar question – Will the voice of the migrants be heard? Will there be any voice at all?

¹ Priya Deshingkar, “Why India’s migrants deserve a better deal”, Livemint, 18th May, 2020, available at <https://www.livemint.com/news/india/why-india-s-migrants-deserve-a-better-deal-11589818749274.html> and accessed on 7th June 2020.

² Census of India, 2011 as cited in “India has 139 million internal migrants. They must not be forgotten” World Economic Forum, 1st October 2017 available at <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2017/10/india-has-139-million-internal-migrants-we-must-not-forget-them/> and accessed on 7th June 2020.

³ This is a rough estimate.

⁴ “In this period, India’s weekly unemployment rate has consistently been over 20 per cent, data from CMIE shows. Yet, Gangwar, Minister of State (independent charge) for Labour and Employment, has largely remained silent amid this massive humanitarian crisis that the government roughly pegs involves 8 crore migrant workers.” As cited in REMYA NAIR and SHANKER ARNIMESH 20 May, 2020, The Print available at <https://theprint.in/theprint->

[profile/indias-battling-its-biggest-migrant-labour-crisis-and-labour-minister-gangwar-is-missing/425693/](https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1962/overdetermination.htm) and accessed on 7th June 2020.

⁵ In this paper, inter-state migrant workers and internal migrant workers are used interchangeably.

⁶ Louis Althusser (1962), *Contradiction and Overdetermination*, available at <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1962/overdetermination.htm>

⁷ In this paper we are concerned only with the internal migrants. But we should not forget that India has a very large contingent of outward migrants and in this regard, India is the largest recipient of remittances from abroad. If one includes these outward or external migrants the number of total migrant workers concerning Indian economy will be much more than 139 million.

⁸ See Renana Jhavala, Ratna M. Sudarshan and Jeemol Unni (Edited), *Informal Economy Centrestage – New Structures of Employment*, Sage India, New Delhi, 2003.

⁹ See Jan Bremen (2012), *Footloose Labour – Working in the India’s Informal Economy*, Cambridge University Press, 2012.

¹⁰ See Ritojyoti Bandyopadhyay (2020), “Migrant Labour, Informal Economy, and Logistics Sector in a Covid-19 World” in Ranabir Samaddar (Edited), *Borders of An Epidemic – Covid-19 and the Migrant Workers*, Mahanirvan Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, May 2020 available at http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_Migration_2020/COVID-19.pdf and accessed on 2nd June 2020.

¹¹ As per Marx, the total working time a day of a worker can be divided into two parts. One part belongs to the time taken by an individual worker to reproduce his means of subsistence which is socially determined (in capitalist class process this is wage-equivalent of total labour time) and this is coined as necessary labour performed by the concerned worker. And hence this is paid labour. An individual worker does not work just upto his/her necessary labour time. Rather, he/she works beyond this and the labour performed beyond necessary labour time is surplus labour which is unpaid labour and is source of discretionary wealth of the society. See Karl Marx, *Capital*, (Volume I), Penguin Classics, 1976 (Reprinted in 1990).

¹² Class is a process of performance, appropriation, distribution and receipt of surplus labour. See Stephen A. Resnick and Richard D. Wolff (1987), *Knowledge and Class – A Marxian Critique of Political Economy*, Paperback Edition 1989, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London.

¹³ Performance and appropriation of surplus labour constitute Fundamental Class Process and the distribution and receipt of surplus labour constitute subsumed class process. See Resnick and Wolff (1987).

¹⁴ This is as per NSSO which can be found at <https://www.aegon.com/contentassets/f4712f5096df47a9ae77ba5851ee9cc4/india-self-employed-retirement.pdf> and accessed on 3rd June 2020.

¹⁵ See E. Johnson (1978), “Labour as Risk-bearer”, *Cambridge Journal of Economics* as cited in Sunanda Sen and Byasdeb Dasgupta (2009), *Unfreedom and Waged Work – Labour in India’s Manufacturing Industry*, Sage India, Delhi, 2009.

¹⁶ See Byasdeb Dasgupta (2019), “Finance Capital in Marxian Perspective” in Achin Chakraborty, Anjan Chakrabarti, Byasdeb Dasgupta and Samita Sen (edited), *Capital’ in the East – Reflections on Marx*, Springer; pp. 103.

¹⁷ Due to lack of official data for the formal non-manufacturing sectors and also for the informal activities it is not possible for us to calculate the labour share or the wage-productivity gap in these sectors and activities.

¹⁸ See 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> as cited in Samaddar (2020); pp. 16.

¹⁹ See Frederick Engels (1845), *Conditions of the Working Class in England* as available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/condition-working-class-england.pdf> and accessed on 31st May 2020. Note that this is the 175th year of the publication of this seminal work of Engels. We did a field survey on 19th January 2013 as part of an ICSSR funded research project on Imperialism and Labour in the Okhla Industrial Area in Delhi and we found that the plight of the workers – the majority of which migrated from UP, Bihar, and West Bengal was quite akin to what Engels in 1845 observed with respect to the proletariat of England. The workers in dingy small rented rooms somehow live with their fellow workers and from the health and hygiene point

of view it was obnoxiously unimaginable. So, the capital has swelled but with it labour remained at the receiving end bearing all the risks including the risks of public health.

²⁰ There is plethora of reports when this paper is being written in print media and television channels regarding the condition of pauperized walking migrant workers on their way back home. As a case study see Rajat Roy (2020), “Sudden Visibility of Sangram Tudu” in Ranabir Samaddar (edited), *Borders of An Epidemic – Covid-19 and the Migrant Workers*, Mahanirvan Calcutta Research Group, Kolkata, May 2020 available at http://www.mcrg.ac.in/RLS_Migration_2020/COVID-19.pdf and accessed on 2nd June 2020.

²¹ Rohini Chatterji, “Migrant Workers Have Died Almost Every Day Since May 8 Aurangabad Tragedy”, Huffpost, 15th May 2020 available at <https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/migrant-workers-killed-lockdown-in-5ebcfd9bc5b63dbb671141d8> and accessed on 6th June 2020.

²² See What Is A Humanitarian Emergency? humanitarian coalition available at <https://www.humanitariancoalition.ca/info-portal/factsheets/what-is-a-humanitarian-crisis> and accessed on 7th June 2020.

²³ Barkha Dutt, “There is a humanitarian crisis in India. Lift the lockdown, now”, Hindustan Times, 15th May 2020 available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/columns/there-is-a-humanitarian-crisis-in-india-lift-the-lockdown-now/story-RHG3Mjv7B3VrNsZdbTZ1UI.html> and accessed on 7th June 2020.

²⁴ See “Coronavirus: India's lockdown turning into humanitarian crisis” available at <https://www.dw.com/en/coronavirus-indias-lockdown-turning-into-humanitarian-crisis/a-53377588> and accessed on 7th June 2020. Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) is an organization which works with migrant workers across states.

²⁵ Ritwika Mitra, “Migrant workers do not know procedures: Stranded Workers Action Network”, The New Indian Express, 13th May 2020 available at <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/may/13/migrant-workers-do-not-know-procedures-stranded-workers-action-network-2142812.html> and accessed on 7th June 2020.

²⁶ See Roshan Kishore, “Boosting demand key for economic revival”, Hindustan Times, 8th June 2020 available at <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/boosting-demand-key-for-economic-revival/story-HVPcub0YRt5drpDDuQWQGQN.html> and accessed on 9th June 2020.

²⁷ Only some State Governments like West Bengal Government bore the train fare.

²⁸ Bhadra Sinha, “This 1979 inter-state workmen law could help avert migrant crisis if enforced strictly”. The Print, 8th June 2020 available at https://theprint.in/judiciary/this-1979-inter-state-workmen-law-could-help-avert-migrant-crisis-if-enforced-strictly/437494/?utm_source=izooto&utm_medium=push_notification&utm_campaign=ThePrint and accessed on 9th June 2020. Although to our opinion this law is not adequate enough to deal with the problems of migrant workers genuinely.

²⁹ One idea of democracy in economic space is provided by Richard D. Wolff in terms of Workers’ Self Directed Enterprises which to a large extent corroborates to Tagore’s notion of cooperative enterprises. See Richard D. Wolff (2012), *Democracy at Work – A Cure for Capitalism*, Haymarket Books, Chicago.

³⁰ We do not claim here the list of alternatives is exhaustive. There may be other alternatives which will once again crucially depend upon the path to be taken by the political.

³¹ Frederick Engels (1845), *Conditions of the Working Class in England*, available at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/condition-working-class/>. See the chapter on Labour Movements.

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