LONG MARCH TO FREEDOM AND DIGNITY

Migrant Workers' Long Ordeal is Far From Over

Covid-19 has altered lives in more profound ways than we acknowledge. The virus has no caste, class or religion but somehow, like all calamities, it has hit the poor more severely. Not only because the marginalised people tend to have more comorbidities and limited access to healthcare, but also because social-distancing is more difficult for people with smaller houses, larger families and compulsions to go out and earn for the day.

The pandemic has exposed the underbellies of all societies. In the US and Europe, the victims are more likely to be the blacks, Hispanics or the immigrants. In India, these tend to be people who come from society's poorer and weaker sections like the SC/ STs or the minorities. The pandemic has also exposed the inadequacy of the public health infrastructure in our country.

It has revealed our un-freedoms and disparities to us which we should have known anyway. The UN High Commissioner for Human rights, Michelle Bachelet, said in a recent address that "the appalling impact of COVID-19 on racial and ethnic minorities is much discussed, but what is less clear is how much is being done to address it." She points out something even more serious than the disease: There is no evidence that this revelation has led to prioritising monitoring and testing of the more vulnerable or increasing their access to healthcare.

The pandemic is also a story of lost livelihoods and reverse-migration for millions who work in the cities. The most abiding image of the COVID crisis in India is of families walking on the highways in unbearable heat, often without food or water. The lucky ones used motorbikes or hitched a ride on anything that moves. They rushed back to villages in the belief that their families will be relatively better off without having to pay house rents or food bills. But the villages had their own hardships too. The lockdown had paralysed farm activities like harvesting or the sale of grains or vegetables.

While it took weeks before the trains and buses restarted, the government focused more on controlling the media narrative rather than the actual crisis. Spectacular events were mounted such as the Air Force helicopters showering petals, the naval ships shooting flares in the skies or the nation clapping or switching off the lights. These massive media spectacles transfixed audiences, overshadowing all other problems. And by abandoning its adversarial role, the mainstream media helped the bungling authorities at the cost of the public. For a long time, an influential section of the media blamed the spread of the virus on a gathering of the minority community, ignoring similar congregations of other faiths. The media's framing of the pandemic, however, merits a separate debate.

Now, after many months have passed, three sets of questions confront us which we have tried to address in this issue of your journal: how many people travelled back to villages, was it avoidable, and could we have handled the lockdown better?

First, the massive numbers which underline the importance of the matter. The government is yet to release authoritative figures but the Solicitor General told the Supreme Court that "no one is on the road." It was perhaps the most blatant and insensitive of lies ever to be told officially in the temple of justice. This, at a time when images and videos of migrant families were trending everywhere. Unofficial estimates by urban geographer Amitabh Kundu and migration specialist Chinmay Tumbe put the number in the range of 22

to 30 million. And yet, the apex court accepted the government's claim without a question or a probe. In fact, the court showed no particular hurry in knowing the numbers and was curiously generous in granting adjournments in a petition seeking urgent action. The case was finally dismissed on the ground that the government was "looking into" the matter. It seems, it still is.

Second, was it necessary? While a lockdown was inevitable, the four-hour notice was still a shocker for a nation of 1.3 billion people. It worked well for those with homes and incomes, but walking back seemed a more dignified option to the poor. Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), a civil society initiative, found in a survey that eight out of 10 workers to approach them did not receive any government rations and more than 85 per cent had to pay for their journey home. True, the Supreme Court later directed the state governments to bear the cost of transportation but that was perhaps too late for those already on the way. It was not just for the fear of the disease but also the lack of jobs, incomes or food which forced them into taking the decision, the report concluded.

And finally, could we have handled the lockdown better? It is now clear that just as the four-hour notice was too little, a complete lockdown for 21 days was too severe. *The New York Times* called it "the biggest and most severe action taken anywhere to stop the spread of coronavirus." The government would have known better if it had consulted stakeholders like the state chief ministers or the heads of the country's vast transport networks before announcing the grand order. To its credit, the government did announce free rations for the poor but the distribution was marred by huge exclusion and lack of clarity. Many state governments abdicated oversight as ration dealers shut their shops in the name of COVID. At some places, even the police shut down the food stores in violation of the orders.

With the government nearly invisible, people did not know who to contact when ration shops were shut or when hospitals turned away patients. And the migrant workers, who walked through unknown cities with no local address, were denied entitlements to healthcare or government supplies. They had to face the wrath of the police which became the face of the state. The migrants were treated particularly harshly at the inter-state borders. At some places, they were sprayed with disinfectants which was an act of both stupidity and cruelty. The police, without capacity or training, were given unfair duties such as contact tracing, insulating contamination zones and enforcing compliance of the Aarogya Setu App, along with organising the distribution of relief and medicines.

At many places, police personnel also went out of the way to help. But for every example of compassionate policing, there are stories of harassment and brutality, even custodial killings. But as a group of citizens, the homeward-bound workers and their families were the worst sufferers of the lockdown. The cities virtually evicted them, the highways treated them with hunger, exhaustion and harassment, and quarantines awaited them at their destinations. As nowhere people, many are ready to leave for the cities yet again in the hope of earning a livelihood.

Like always, your feedback is welcome at commoncauseindia@gmail.com

Vipul Mudgal
Editor