



Loss of Life Chances of Migrant Labourers in India in the Face of *Corona* Virus Pandemic

Nutan Marian Tigga*

Abstract

This paper proposes to study the constrained situations faced at different levels by various sections of people, for example-daily wagers, migrant laborers including men, women and children. The paper further discusses the limited freedom of mobility, hygiene, secured and safe transportation available to certain sections of people who find themselves helpless in front of the draconian structure. The dilution of labour laws amidst Covid-19 also needs to be discussed and revisited. There is a huge disparity in the extent to which freedom of opportunities and life-chances people have, during the corona virus pandemic. I would also like to highlight the importance of community and how in the era of individualism, community and community services have helped many families adversely affected by corona virus pandemic. A loss of freedom is also witnessed during this time as healthcare is not easily available to many poor sections of the society. Lastly, I would like to discuss a special economic scheme introduced by the government to boost economic activities. There is a huge gap which needs to be narrowed down. The scheme was launched to help small investors, like vegetable sellers, farmers, and vendors to keep afloat.

Keywords: *Corona Virus, Migration, Labor Laws, Health, Community.*

Introduction

Change is the inevitable certainty of life. As a human being, we are socialized to continuously change the “self” as well as the perspective towards others. The way we engage ourselves with different groups like our primary group of families and peers, colleagues and in front of a professional group, largely depends on our biography. And as C.W Mills rightly argues that biography is intertwined with history. Of course, history means the larger society where the individual finds himself/herself a part of. It is always an interesting study to see how the social constraints and opportunities are knitted with individuals and the social system. The year 2020 witnessed a huge constraint of lockdowns and major health concerns

* Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Email: nutan.tigga@gmail.com

at a global level due to the pandemic Covid-19. It makes an engaging study to witness the social system and how many levels of stratifications are exposed in the face of corona virus. My paper focuses on migrant labourers and their loss of life chances during this pandemic. The present situation resonates with the concept of “Risk Society” by Ulrich Beck. I would like to believe that this pandemic is an environmental hazard which is actually the unforeseen result of modernization and excessive exploitation of nature and her resources. This paper has been written based on contemporary situations in India, digital news and observation. Apart from this, primary data has also been collected through informal discussion and experiences shared over telephonic conversations.

Janata Curfew and First Lockdown in India

Janta curfew was called on 22nd March 2020 by the Prime Minister of India Mr Narendra Modi. The meaning of the word janta in hindi is public. By this time, coronavirus had already hit the news bulletin and had become a debatable topic in most conversations but little was realised of the vast implication it would bring along. Mr Modi, our Prime Minister announced a janata curfew from 7 am to 9 pm Sunday, to curb the spread of the virus that had already claimed four lives and infected at least 169 others in the country. People were not supposed to leave their homes during this 14 hours janta curfew. It marked the onset of a long battle against the corona virus outbreak. But this was just the tip of the iceberg.

On 24th March 2020, the govt of India ordered a nationwide lockdown for 21 days, limiting movement of the entire 1.3 billion population of India as a preventive measure against covid 19 pandemic. These constrained situations have continued over many phases of lockdowns.[†] These lockdowns compelled and changed the pattern of work structure. ‘Online work’ and ‘Work from home model’ was being encouraged for most sectors. The salaries of many employees have also been affected adversely. For instance, the payment of school employees is now depending solely on the amount of fees that the students are able to pay. Many private sectors also cut down the remuneration of their employees by thirty to forty-five percent.[‡] The scenario seems grim for most people but the worst affected sections are the lower-class people and wage labourers. The situation for the wage labourers was grave as most factories and local manufacturing units had come to stand still. Besides this, they could not even stay in the place where they work because most of them did not have enough money to pay the rent. Transport system had come to a standstill. There were no means of transportation for these migrant labourers. Interstate buses did not operate and neither the trains were running. Lack of money and shortage of food pushed the migrant labourers to head back to their native place. This situation was very different for the affluent section of the society. Airline services were still operating for a few more days amid the lockdown. Thus the contrast between these two sections varies not only on economic terms but also in accessing the resources. The government made no arrangements for the migrant labourers to get back home safely. As the government had called for the lockdown, a lot of jobs were at

[†] https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/india-will-be-under-complete-lockdown-starting-midnight-narendra-modi/articleshow/74796908.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

[‡] Based on telephonic interviews , conversations as well as observations

stake, many migrant labourers who worked at construction sites, away from their native villages, found it difficult to survive without wage and proper shelter or food.

Stay Home Stay Safe[§]

Away from home, it seems that lockdown is only the beginning of misery for India's migrant labourers. India's estimated 140 million labourers not only faced the threat of the coronavirus, their economic survival was also endangered. They were far away from the slogan, "stay home stay safe". Neither were they home and nor were they safe. With all the transport system shutting down, these migrant labourers started to endeavour on a journey which would soon become the headlines for national television. Masses of migrant labourers including men, women, and children were seen walking thousands of kilometres towards home. These migrant labourers experience hunger, thirst, anxiety, and the harsh climatic conditions. These workers are alienated not only from their home but also alienated from the system.

Workers are desperate as they have not only lost their meager income, but also they are facing a dire situation with their only options being to risk contracting COVID-19 or facing starvation. Thus, many of the workers have set out to walk hundreds if not thousands of miles to return to their native villages. They carry with themselves few of their belongings, children on their shoulders and no food in their bellies. Many have already lost their lives on the way.

There are many concerns regarding the life chances of these workers. They no longer have a job, very less money, no financial savings and very less likelihood of finding a source of income in their native place. One should not forget that these labourers had migrated to cities and industrial places, in the first place, in search of better livelihood and life chances. Villages and rural places in India do not offer much beyond agricultural work. Thus, in search of better opportunities and job prospects, these workers find work in construction sites, as daily wage labourers in brick factories and so on. With the present scenario, these labourers are forced to come back to their native place. Apart from this, there is also the concern of stigma among the larger population. They face a lot of trauma and people look down upon them. They are treated with least respect and dignity. These migrant labourers will find it challenging to secure a steady job in their native places and on the other hand they do not wish to go back to their workplace. At this juncture, I would also like to focus on the term "migrant" which is used to refer to these workers. It is ironic to mention that these workers are the ones who build huge towers, offices, government buildings, residential complexes, shopping malls and may be every high rise building which we see. They are the ones who carry the bricks, lay down the foundation, cement the ceilings and yet at the time of crisis, they are marked as migrant labourers portraying as if they do not belong to the same land. We need to understand that development only through urbanisation and concretisation will not serve every household^{**}. One need to look deeper into the question of self

[§] To limit the spread of Covid 19 through social distancing.

^{**} Inspired by a folk song from the movie 'Bhor'. A post shared on social media page

actualisation and understand that self is merely the reflection and socialization process of the society. One can no longer ignore the fact that rural areas and villages lack proper educational systems, healthcare services and job opportunities. I would like to throw light on one such incident where a 15 year old girl Jyoti Kumari Paswan rode a bicycle for 1200 km with an ailing father from Sikandarpur in Haryana to Darbhanga in Bihar. She pedaled for eight days so that her father can get medical attention. This lone event should tell the plight of rural India. I believe, one should not only work towards development, one should also work towards prosperity and sustainability^{††}.

Social Stratification and Health Care

This is not just an isolated incident. Prior to the pandemic era, many news headlines would flash the miserable situation of rural India where a man carries his dead wife's body over hundreds of kilometers in hope of receiving medical assistance. There are still many villages in India which do not have hospitals or clinics. There are interior areas where roads are yet to be constructed properly. There are no proper roads or connectivity. Even if there are government hospitals, finding a doctor or a proper medical assistance is a big concern. Disparity in healthcare services is clearly seen also in urban areas and metro cities. During this pandemic, the government hospitals, where the lower section population and underprivileged people look towards, are in poor conditions. They are not equipped well and the facilities needed to combat covid 19 are not sufficient. The patients are kept in dingy cramped up spaces. Patients' beds are kept too close to each other. There is no social distancing being maintained. And the worst scenario is that these patients are treated like untouchables. No proper care is given. Doctors and medical staff do not attend them properly. The bathrooms and washrooms of these sections are dirty and unhygienic. Pregnant women who are covid 19 had to deliver in front of the hospital gates as they would not be admitted within the hospitals. The way Covid 19 patients are being treated is inhumane and disrespectfully.^{‡‡} If we look at the recent news which is developing, it can be seen that the scenario is totally opposite in some cases. If the pregnant woman is tested negative for Covid 19, then she is not even admitted into the hospital. On the other hand, private hospitals pose a different challenge. The medical facilities to fight the virus may be available but the cost of the treatment is very high. Medical expense of rupees twenty lacs for twenty three days of coronavirus treatment or even sixteen lac bill is not affordable even for a middle class family^{§§}.

Special Trains for Migrants-Shramik Trains

Having talked about health care services, I would also like to discuss government initiative to run special trains called the *shramik* trains^{***}. The *shramik* word means worker's train. The word *shramik* derives from *shram* which means work. These are special trains

^{††} <https://theprint.in/india/jyoti-kumari-says-education-only-dream-but-she-also-cycles-every-night-for-proposed-trials/430061/>

^{‡‡} Based on an interview with a COVID-19 patient who was quarantined and treated for Covid-19 in Durgapur hospital

^{§§} <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Hyderabad/20-lakh-bill-for-23-day-coronavirus-treatment/article31790684.ece>

^{***} <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/topic/shramik-special-trains>

especially made available only to workers who were stuck in various cities and wanted to come back to their native land. These trains are boon as well as bane. These trains do not halt once it starts and it will stop only at its destination. In such a case, trains that were supposed to reach their destination in two days, took nine days to reach their final station. The workers in these trains were hungry, thirsty, there was no social distancing, they were anxious and many workers even died in these trains. If data is to be seen, as many as a million migrant laborers have returned to west Bengal.^{†††} The west Bengal government is also creating a database of the migrant workers on the basis of their skills. This will help the state to create a manpower bank and provide them opportunities of livelihood. But the problem does not halt here. There seems to be conflict of interest between the local and the migrant laborers. The locals fear that these migrant laborers are a potential threat to them as they could take over their source of livelihood. Apart from that these migrant labourers are poorly treated. They are looked down upon who is still carrying the threat of coronavirus or that these migrant laborers would spread the virus.

But I won't go all dark in this paper. I would also like to look at the brighter side of these shramik trains where it has proved as a blessing and brought families back to their native places. I would like to take time to mention a young couple who were stuck in Hosur in Tamil Nadu. The wife is about six weeks pregnant with their child. Both the husband and wife are daily wagers and they work at the construction site in Hosur. They were running out of money, food and hope to get back home. More than their security, they were concerned about the medical facilities. Medicines, care of the child and mother, medical tests which are essential during this crucial time were not being availed by this young couple. The lockdown had made it even difficult for them to visit a clinic and do a medical sonography. The situation was grim for them. The husband would visit the railway enquiry almost every day. It took some time, but they were able to board one of the *shramik* trains which reached their destination. Having reached their destination in three days, this couple had to spend fourteen days in the quarantine centers^{††††}.

Ulrich Beck and “Risk Society”

The times at which we are living reminds me of a German Sociologist Ulrich Beck and his important contribution “Risk Society”. The theme of risk is even more visible and an important topic of discussion at the face of this pandemic. Terror, unemployment and environmental catastrophes dominate the news agenda around the world. The German sociologist Ulrich Beck attributes this to a far-reaching change which he calls “reflexive modernization,” where unintended and unforeseen side-effects of modern life backfire on modernity, questioning the very basis of its definition. I am urged to argue that Ulrich Beck's far sighted vision for the future had portrayed a very dark society filled with anxiety, distrust, social differences, widening the gap between the haves and have-nots, turmoil and chaos.

††† <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/create-database-for-migrants-from-wb/article31605723.ece>

†††† Based on telephonic conversation and interviews

The contemporary world faces a lot of challenges and complexities. Major sections of population are at the brink of turmoil, war, conflict and environmental hazards. We should not assume that anyone or any section of the population is immune to such chaos. Lack of resources, poverty, social inequality, pandemic and economic instability are threatening the prospect of peace and development. Such crises are complex and pose a threat on multiple forms of human security. It has a potential to grow exponentially, creating chaos and turmoil into all aspects of people's lives, disturbing entire communities and crossing national borders.

The Importance of Community

While we are talking about prosperity and development, we also need to remember that this is not an individual endeavour. It is a community development and grass root involvement. In Jalpaiguri, a place famous for tea gardens has set an example. The majority of the population in Jalpaiguri consists of *adivasis* or the indigenous people whose ancestors were brought here from chotanagpur area as bonded labourers. They were brought here under the false knowledge and false notion that they will be given better opportunities in life, a better source of income. Instead, in reality they were made bonded labourers. *Adivasis* are very humble and simple in nature who easily trust people, thus many middlemen, moneylenders and landlords took advantage of their generous nature and exploited them. These *adivasi* are extremely poor and most of them are daily wagers who work in the tea garden. They have struggled a lot and are still struggling for better life chances. There are still families who are under bonded labourers, whose great grand ancestors were also bonded labourers. With the passing of time, slowly and steadily, education and steadfast local leadership has brought in a ray of light. In contemporary times, there are many children who are the first generation learners. These children are the first generation learners who are studying in different colleges situated in different cities. They have moved out for further studies. As the entire country was called for the nationwide lockdown, these children had to come back home. They understood that this crisis will hit them hard. There was no source of income, very less savings and no jobs in the tea garden. In Jalpaiguri, working in the tea garden is the only occupation that one can take up. There is no agriculture and neither any other alternative source of livelihood. These children came up with a volunteer work under the banner name of *Madait* which means extending support in English. During the lockdown phase where the entire population was without any livelihood, scarcity of finance and food, these children contacted and pooled in resources to feed as many as 400 households. This has not been just one person contribution but an entire community or members of that community came forward to help other members. Resources were shared, financial assistance was provided, and food chain and supplies were structured so that families in need would be assisted. Students used their network efficiently and pooled in resources. They propagated their need through Whatsapp and other social media platforms. Virtual platforms played an important medium of communication. Instagram and Whatsapp status were heavily used to spread the need of the hour. Here face to face communication hardly took place. Online messages, photos, the news of lockdown and the loss of livelihood tied many people with emotions of trust and love towards one another. It was understood that the shared experience of lockdown had brought people close to one another, may be not physically but in thoughts

and in deeds.^{§§§} Thus it is important that the notion of individualism needs to be revisited. Today we must remember the notion of ubuntu and practice it consciously in our everyday life. The values of being together, sharing resources, well being of others, generosity and tenderness needs to be cultured and cultivated.

Labour Laws and Change

The change in values, of course is going to take time, but the pandemic has brought drastic changes in the legal, economic and political sphere very drastically. 1870 marked the beginning of the labour laws movement in India and by 1881 Factories Act was enacted upon. With the passage of time, working hours for the workers were reduced from sixteen hours to fourteen hours, and then eventually to twelve hours per day. At the contemporary times, it is eight hours under The Factories Act, 1948. The structure of labour rights was constructed in the country between 1940 and 1960. Now, unexpectedly with a blow of an executive arrangement, it has been ruined. We have moved back to the 19th century with regard to the labour laws. There is no longer governance but a free labour market now, which undoubtedly will become exploitative in nature. There is minimum or no check in the labour market. And the state has become a mute observer. The government is sending out a clear message that is telling workers that they have to work as per the employers' whims. The government would not interfere in any industrial dispute and that labourers cannot form trade unions or go to labour courts. Further the pictures get darker as there are things like a new factory need not provide toilets to its employees nor do they have to provide better work conditions such as lighting or ventilation. It is all being done in the name of a few foreign companies which want to relocate from China. They are saying it will boost investment and generate employment. It is a utopian, unforgivably dull picture that the government has painted. One can say that the government has washed its hands from the situation and the laborers are at the mercy of the system.

There are prominent changes in labour laws in India which need to be highlighted. The changes in the labour laws will apply to both the existing businesses and the new factories being set up. Similarly, the Madhya Pradesh government suspended many labour laws for the next 1000 days which is about three years^{****}. There are a few important amendments which should be mentioned. The employers can increase working hours in factories from eight hours to twelve hours and are also allowed up to seventy two hours a week in overtime, subject to the will of employees. Besides that, the registration of the factories now will be done in a day, instead of thirty days. The license for these factories should be renewed after 10 years, instead of a year. There is also the provision of penalty on officials not complying with the deadline. Industrial Units will be exempted from majority of the provisions of the Industrial Disputes Act, 1947 which means that the organizations will be able to keep workers in service at their convenience. The sad part is that the Labor Department or the labour court will not interfere in the action taken by the factories and

^{§§§} Interviews and telephonic conversation with these grass route activists.

^{****} <https://www.civildaily.com/news/relaxation-in-labour-laws-due-to-covid-19-outbreak-and-their-impacts/>

industries. Apart from this, contractors employing less than fifty workers will be able to work without registration under the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970.^{††††}

Major relaxations to new industrial units should be discussed here. The new industries are exempted from the provisions on ‘right of workers’. According to this right, details of the workers’ health and safety at work is ensured.^{‡‡‡‡} They are entitled to a better work environment which include drinking water, ventilation, crèches, weekly holidays and intervals of rest and so on.^{§§§§} They are further exempted from the obligation of maintaining registers and inspections and can change shifts at their convenience. Lastly, the nail in the coffin, the employers are exempt from penalties in case of violation of labour laws.

Given the changes in the labour laws, it reflects the desperation of the government to revive the economy of the nation. But the heavy cost is being paid by the poor section, specially these migrant workers. They have been stripped off their minimum rights and are at the mercy of the industries and factory rules and regulations. These workers cannot afford to be idle or else they face hunger and starvation. What needs to be understood is that drastic economic and legal changes also have psychological effects. Due to Covid 19 and nationwide lockdown there was a loss of job, source of livelihood, a huge downfall which led to many deaths and stressful situations. Psychologically, the laborers face loss of hope, and are highly demotivated. This has led to depression, strained relationships, unpleasant arguments and domestic physical abuse too.

As we are coming to the end of the paper, I would also like to discuss a special economic package which has been launched by the government to revive the small investors, farmers and migrant labourers. Prime Minister Narendra Modi announces Rs 20 lakh crore special economic package. The package is for the labourers, peasants, MSMEs and cottage industry as Mr Narendra Modi clearly pointed out. The package focuses on land, labour, liquidity and laws, and will cater to various sectors including the cottage industries, micro, small & medium enterprises (MSMEs), the working class, middle class and industry, among others. He further mentioned that the package will also focus on empowering the poor, labourers and migrant workers, both in the organised and unorganised sectors, seeking to increase efficiency and ensure quality.

It is not to be forgotten that reality is far away from what is written down in black and white. It is a very grim situation for the daily wagers and laborers’ but how this pandemic era further affects their life chances and their freedom to minimum dignity to life still needs to be unfolded.

†††† *ibid*

‡‡‡‡ *ibid*

§§§§ *Ibid*

Conclusion

This lockdown has brought many changes and revealed the structural inequality present in the social system. There are so many times when, I believe, the social system should have been more inclusive in nature, rather than being discriminatory. The entire world is changing, in terms of greater interconnectedness, faster mode of communication, social and racial prejudice, and in terms of recognizing that each individual has her /his voice. And every voice has the right to speak for herself.

One of the messages which I would like to talk about is how do we deal with globalization, increased mobility, technology, greater connectedness, older forms of identity, racism prejudice, cooperation and each one having his and her own voice. It has to be understood and socialized that every person has dignity and respect. This of course cannot be achieved overnight. And in this process, each one of us has a role to play and in affirming those values. There are also times where we fall short but I believe, the broader aspiration of human rights, values and security for the people around the world call for global integration.

I would also like to mention that in the pursuit of Global Integration, one must remember the importance of local knowledge, their understanding of environment and sustainability. The social integration at the global level should be enriched and intertwined with local voices and grassroot realities. The social structure should build on local interconnectedness and mutual exchange of knowledge, technological and medical advancement. In the age of fast internet and greater interconnectedness, we should recognize and celebrate the diversity of the human race, embrace the differences and provide every person the dignity and respect of human life. The concept of Ubuntu is worth mentioning here. The term Ubuntu means "I am because we are". It is a beautiful word which speaks volume about interdependence, trust, sharing and receiving. It is an opportunity to explore and contribute towards the community, which gives every individual a chance to grow, and to exceed beyond certain expectations.

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