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Failure of Governance Systems *during* COVID-19

It's a matter of shame that neither the government was capable of providing them food and necessities for the period of the lockdown nor does it have any record of them. They are called unorganised workers surviving on a daily wage without any social benefits of medical insurance, Provident Fund and leave of absence.

India has reportedly 40 million migrant workers who can only afford to live in slums, colonies or sites of work and 1.8 million homeless citizens according to the 2011 census. In the slums, 7-8 workers are squeezed into a 10x10 ft. room, toilets are shared by many men and women and water is an expensive commodity.

The lockdown was announced with just four hours' notice when COVID19 positive cases were just 300. In a country like India, asking its citizens to stay inside homes, maintain social distance,

and wash hands several times was a bitter joke.

The move was unplanned and what followed was unprecedented. Lack of work, the decline of agriculture as a means of sustenance, extremely low wages, caste discriminations and atrocities, natural calamities like floods, drought and socio-political factors forced people to migrate in search of their livelihood to cities from villages.

In cities, these migrant workers work in areas such as construction, carpentry, tailoring, hotels and restaurants,

garment industry, delivery of goods, security service and garbage collection. With the salary they get they can barely manage expenses and send money back home to their families.

During the lockdown period from 22 March till 14 April, migrant workers as well as native workers who are mostly informal workers, daily wage earners, for whom it is 'no work no pay' became jobless overnight. Just four hours' notice immobilized them and they got stuck in the corners and outskirts of the cities with no food and money, abandoned by their employers.

Faced with a severe backlash, the government stopped these people from migrating back home, promising free food and shelter. But as reports were coming out, State Governments did not have any record of the number of migrant workers and the locations where they were stranded.

States started giving cooked food twice a day at specified locations with the help of several NGOs. These locations were sometimes very far from the place where

workers were stranded, so they had to walk 2 km back and forth to get each meal.


After reaching the location and standing in queue for two hours the food would have finished and they had to return with an empty stomach and a sense of indignation. Appalled by the plight of workers living in this kind of uncertainty and indignity an appeal was filed in the Supreme Court that money be paid to the workers during this lockdown. But what the Supreme Court said was appalling and dehumanising. The Court said workers are getting cooked food, so what is the need for money!

One can't help but wonder, does a human being only need meals twice a day to survive? What about other expenses for medicine, urgent healthcare services, room or house rent, and drinking water?

Migrant workers had built the city, run the economy, increased the GDP of the country and paid taxes all along for every expense. So, it's a matter of shame that neither the government was capable of providing them food and necessities for the period of the lockdown nor does it have any record of them. They are called unorganized workers surviving on a daily wage without any social benefits of medical insurance, Provident Fund and leave of absence.

Travelling back home

After several protests by workers, clashes with authority, demands from civil society and human rights organization to let the workers return to their native States, on May 1 the government announced that it would run Shramik Special trains that would transport workers to their native States.



As we watched in disbelief the unconstitutional treatment meted out to migrant workers, it reminded us of our constitution which says 'living' is not merely the physical act of breathing. It does not connote mere animal existence or continued drudgery through life. It has a much wider meaning which includes the right to live with human dignity, right to livelihood, and right to health.

With no clear notification, thousands showed up at the railway stations, hoping they could get a train home. State-wise online portals started to register workers who wanted to go back home. But most workers found it difficult to register on the site due to lack of knowledge of the language used in the form or lack of smartphones. Still, 53,000 workers registered for travel back to Bihar alone.

Workers who had been stripped of their last bits of dignity were now made to pay double the fares to return home.

The cities need the service of migrant workers, but won't acknowledge their skills with dignity. Soon after the announcement of trains in Karnataka, the construction builders' lobby fearing that such large-scale reverse migration would impact construction work

requested the Chief Minister, B S Yediyurappa to cancel the trains. Following this, the trains were cancelled. So, the employers who had abandoned the workers during lockdown without any shelter, money, food, and some were even driven out of the place where they were living, were now holding these workers hostage!

Factory owners in the cities began complaining of the shortage of labour. One such owner, who runs a factory making home appliances, says there are over 2,000 such units in Delhi 'employing a lakh or more workers from UP and Bihar, more than half of them are gone and the other half are looking to leave'.

Human rights, morality and ethics went for a toss when we heard stories like these every day: 18 workers were found in Madhya Pradesh, hiding in the drum



of a cement mixing truck. They were trying to make the 1,400 km journey from Mumbai to their homes in Uttar Pradesh. The heat in the drum, one worker told reporters, was more bearable than hunger.

Rakesh Paswan, a 30-year-old mason from East Champaran in Bihar, made a scarce living in the national capital region until the lockdown on March 25. Struggling with unemployment and hunger, when the shutdown was extended till May 3, he cycled 1,100 kilometres to go home.

A pregnant woman delivered by the roadside without getting any medical assistance while walking 400 km to reach home.

383 people had died since the lockdown was imposed due to road and rail accidents, starvation, denial of medical care, police brutality, exhaustion and suicides. There have been hundreds of non-coronavirus deaths.

Of them, 69 people died in rail or road accidents while walking to their homes – the only mode of travel available as public transport had been suspended. Many migrant workers, their babies and women have died in the course of and after travelling on Shramik trains without food and water, sometimes for 60 odd hours.

There have been cases of trains missing their original route and reaching the destination after 10 days.

Apathy and negligence of judiciary are unparalleled

On May 8, sixteen migrant workers were run over by a train at Aurangabad, Maharashtra while they were trying to

return to their rural homes in Madhya Pradesh. Their minimum belongings, shoes and some 'chapatis' were all that was left on the tracks.

“How can anyone stop this when they sleep on railway tracks,” the Supreme Court said a week after the accident. The survivors said that since they didn't know the route, they were following railway tracks. They knew trains were not operating due to the lockdown. After walking for so many kilometres, they sat on the tracks to take rest and have some chapattis and fell asleep out of tiredness.

Later, the Supreme Court dismissed an application seeking urgent directions to all District Magistrates to identify the walking labourers and to ensure that they reached their homes, free of cost and in a dignified manner.

This unshaken faith in governance and zero interference in implementation by the highest level of the judiciary left the migrants and the poor in lurch with nobody to turn to. As we watched in disbelief the unconstitutional treatment meted out to migrant workers, it reminded us of our constitution which says 'living' is not merely the physical act of breathing. It does not connote mere animal existence or continued drudgery through life. It has a much wider meaning which includes the right to live with human dignity, right to livelihood, right to health.

The pandemic has exposed a broken system running behind the facade of the fastest developing economy.

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