

The migrant worker as a ghost among citizens●

A new publication contends that their lockdown misery was no anomaly but an effect of exclusion from full citizenship



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When Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the world's most stringent lockdown on March 24, 2020 with barely four hours notice, lakhs of migrant workers across the country found themselves trapped in a novel situation: their livelihood in the city was gone, but they could not return to their native villages. The lockdown offered them only two options: starvation or charity. It was merely a matter of time before they pursued the third option: an arduous walk to their homes hundreds of kilometers away, risking starvation and death. Many did die in transit.

India is not the only country to have witnessed lockdown related governance failures. But it stands alone for the sheer magnitude of the humanitarian tragedy unleashed by a poorly conceived lockdown. It was as if the nation's top decision makers had no idea that migrant workers existed. Perhaps this is not as farfetched as it may seem. If we assume that a government makes policies keeping in mind the interests of its citizens, then the question to ask would be: are migrant workers in India full citizens? Or are they half citizens at best, tolerated only because cities and industries need cheap labour.

A new publication, *Citizens and the Sovereign: Stories from the Largest Human Exodus in Contemporary Indian History*, brought out by Migrant Workers Solidarity Network (MWSN), a collective of workers' groups and nongovernmental organisations ([https:// bit.ly/3nRqnHF](https://bit.ly/3nRqnHF) and [https:// bit.ly/2J5Mrzg](https://bit.ly/2J5Mrzg)), explores these questions through the personal experiences of migrant workers. It contends that the avoidable misery they endured during the lockdown was not an anomaly but an effect of their implicit exclusion from full citizenship.

QUARANTINE WITHOUT 'HOME'

Take, for instance, the story of Gulab and Sukhlal, two migrant workers from Delhi. The couple was forced to travel 500 kilometres to Lamgara tehsil in Rajasthan with three children and all their belongings to do 'home quarantine' — in a home that did not exist. Lada, another worker from Delhi, went home to her parents in Rajiyawas, Rajasthan, only to find that their basti alone did not — and will not — get any form of relief because, as per government records, it does not exist.

Lada is a Sansi, while Gulab and Sukhlal are Babarias — all three belong to nomadic tribes. Gulab and Sukhlal have mostly practised the tradition of shifting settlements and do not have a permanent home. "It seems the lockdown had not planned for 'nomads'. All ten crore of them," observes the report. " Their settlements and belongings do not exist enough to exist on paper. They live lives which are too invisible to have rights or its poor substitute, relief. They are ghosts among citizens."

Mere existence, sans cognition by the gaze of the state apparatus, is no longer a sufficient condition of being. Nomadic tribes are the quintessential migrant community. The Indian state's governance structure for nomadic tribes is determined by the Habitual Off enders Act, 1952, which upholds the colonial legacy of treating them either as threat or nuisance, while erasing their rights as citizens. This state of 'nonbeing' that marks the political existence of nomadic tribes extends to India's 5.6 crore migrant workers (2011 Census), who may as well not have existed for the policymakers behind India's lockdown.

The report suggests that the most fitting comparison for India's lockdown is not with those implemented by other countries but one from its own past: the Bubonic Plague of 1896 and the draconian measures implemented under the then newly minted Epidemic Diseases, Act, 1897. Section 4 of this Act grants "Protection to persons acting under Act. No suit or other legal proceeding shall lie against any person for anything done or in good faith intended to be done under this Act." More than 120 years later, policemen protected by this legislation would brutally assault desperate migrants for trying to walk home. Even for the 'independent' Indian state — a democracy where the citizen is supposed to be the sovereign — migrant workers seem to trigger the same repressive impulses that the 'uncouth' natives did for the colonial state.

BRIDGING SOCIAL DISTANCE

A cartoon that went viral during the lockdown captured the anomalous position of the migrant worker in the metropolis. It depicts a street on which families of migrant workers, with their belongings tied up in cloth bundles, are seen trudging past. On either side of the street, at a safe height from this tired procession, people in balconies are seen cheering, clapping and chanting, "Go, corona, go." The cartoon is titled 'social distancing'. The challenge, then, is to bridge the social distance between migrant workers and the rest of urban society, including the ruling elites. As the report observes, "A large portion of lowly paid laboring population of our country have historically come from Adivasi, Dalit and socially oppressed castes as well as religious minorities." This is an important aspect of the reproduction of both caste and capital in India. So, if our cities are organised on a foundation of unorganized labour, and if the very process of claiming entitlements as citizens — such as decent pay, housing, and social protection — requires migrant workers to get organised, then it would seem that structural forces militate against it. That the new labour codes make it nearly impossible to unionise is a case in point.

The active production of migrant labour (from worsening terms of trade for agriculture, displacement from land and forests) and their in visibilised exploitation (in low paid wage work in cities and industrial clusters) are two parallel processes that feed into each other. Urban life in India, as in many developing economies hungry for growth, is premised on a toxic equilibrium generated by these two processes. This has been the case for some decades now. The lockdown caused a violent disturbance of this equilibrium. The migrant worker bore the brunt.

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