

## Imagining Inclusion: Lessons from the Migrant Worker Crisis

- Ayesha Pattnaik

The nationwide lockdown that was announced in light of the COVID-19 pandemic began on 25th March 2020. While Indian streets were emptied of the usual traffic and crowds, they were soon occupied by large groups of migrant workers. The sight of families walking tirelessly with all their belongings was a jarring sight, particularly in many urban areas where issues and challenges of these workers had never drawn attention before. Migrant workers have been [systematically neglected by state institutions and overlooked by the media](#). While the lockdown finally drew attention to them, it was this neglect that only amplified the impact of the lockdown on them.



**A group of migrant workers walk to their native places amid the nationwide lockdown on the NH24 near Delhi-UP border on March 27 (Photo: PTI)**

I joined the research wing of PRADAN a few weeks after the lockdown began. Our work quickly introduced me to the hardships being faced at multiple fronts by India's rural communities. The most overwhelming experience for me was recording the struggles faced by migrant workers who were

stranded across Indian states. Through interviews conducted by the team as well as messages recorded by the workers stranded at various places on the CHIRAGVaani helpline, I found the situation of migrant workers was only becoming increasingly desperate as the lockdown continued. My analysis has led me to believe that it would be a lost opportunity to cast aside the experiences of migrant workers and rebuild the country's economy without understanding the challenges they face.

***“The key challenges I perceived facing migrant workers emerged from structural issues that caused a loss of both material resources and dignity”***

The pattern I discerned across states was that both food and wage security were severely compromised by the lockdown, with little safeguards in place to protect either. Migrant workers were particularly disadvantaged by being trapped in states where they were not permanent residents. Not having official identification rooted in the state they were trapped in made it difficult for them to access services. Many called in saying that they had exhausted food supplies and money. When asked about their last salary, most workers spoken to said they were not getting adequate support from either their employer or contractor. The key challenges I perceived facing migrant workers emerged from structural issues that caused a loss of both material resources and dignity.

In my opinion, their vulnerability was further deepened by a lack of awareness, as most migrant workers did not have access to information on the few specific schemes or helplines providing support. Most of the workers interviewed had not called any helplines or did not know about any schemes. Language was also a barrier in particular states that not only impeded access to services but also intensified feelings of isolation. While the research team were able to connect migrant workers with various resources, the information gap was apparent and seemed to be increasing their helplessness. Compounding the demoralisation and loss of faith that was apparent among many workers were the various forms of humiliation they faced, from police brutality to being hosed down by disinfectants.

The current crisis of migrant workers leads me to question how their struggles, though so integral to our economy, have remained largely invisible. As part of my research I have been attending various discussions on the migrant workers' crisis. Activists like Manoranjan Pegu and Umi Daniel, who have been working on migrant workers rights for years, are quick to point out that the exploitation of migrant workers is not a new issue. Low wages and long working hours have been long standing problems faced by migrant workers, along with having to live in cramped spaces with limited access to amenities. The pandemic has only given us a glimpse of the structural issues embedded in the economy that exploit migrant workers.

The invisibility of migrant workers in the current economic framework impacts their access to rights as well. Neither considered residents of their home states nor the states they work in, migrant workers are largely overlooked in policy making. In his analysis of India's few labour laws like the Interstate Migrant Workers Act (1979) or the Building and Construction Workers Act (1996), Rajesh Joseph<sup>1</sup> discusses how the registration of workers is legally mandated but rarely enforced. The idea of migration also bears a negative connotation in many languages as the word for migrant workers classifies them as 'others' or 'outsiders'. With the current pandemic, migrant workers are largely viewed as carriers of the virus and seen as perpetrators rather than victims. Migrant workers are often invisible not just economically, but within political and social institutions as well.

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While immediate solutions need to be developed to ensure the safe return of migrant workers to their homes, it is vital that moving forward their struggles are not forgotten. Now is the opportune moment to re-imagine and include the roles, rights, and safeguards for migrant workers into discussions of rebuilding the economy and restoring normalcy. It is crucial to remember that the state of “normalcy” before the pandemic only legitimised the exploitation of migrant workers and in that manner

<sup>1</sup> Quoted from webinar hosted by *International Justice Mission, India* on 30th April, 2020 titled “COVID-19: Migration and Rule of Law: Examining the Interplay of Law, Life and Livelihood”

intensified their struggles during the lockdown. Normalcy needs to be re-defined in order to ensure workers are accorded security and dignity.

My experience of learning about the harrowing experiences of migrant workers often evoked a sense of pessimism, and made me question whether after the crisis tides over their struggles will be forgotten. I think the fact that this project brings these voices to the surface and allows them to breathe is all the more reason for more efforts to include them. Perhaps this crisis has offered an opportunity for institutions to learn from these voices and build a long-term vision safeguarding migrant workers' rights'.

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