

## Global Issues

### **The COVID-19 Lockdown in India: A Predictable Catastrophe for Informal Labour**

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The first case of COVID-19 in India was detected in Kerala on 30 January 2020, with two more cases on 2 and 3 February. All three were students who had returned from Wuhan. By then it was common knowledge that the virus was spreading around the world. The World Health Organization had declared a global health emergency, but the Indian government made no move to restrict international travel, test arrivals for COVID-19, or ensure that the infection did not spread. On the contrary, the main preoccupation of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and his Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) was hosting Donald Trump. There was special emphasis on organising the “Namaste Trump” event in Motera Stadium in Ahmedabad in the prime minister’s home state of Gujarat, ensuring that more than 100 000 people attended the event and lined the streets from the airport to the stadium.

By 4 March, twenty-six more people had tested positive: one who had travelled in the United Arab Emirates, others who were either Italian tourists or had returned from Italy, and those who had come into contact with them, including family members. More people who had travelled to Iran, Malaysia, Thailand, South Korea, Oman, the United States, Dubai, Saudi Arabia, Canada, Japan, Switzerland, Greece, Qatar, Spain, Russia, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, Finland, France, Indonesia, Germany, Ireland and the Philippines tested positive in the first three weeks of March. By this time, local transmission was taking place.

The first response to the crisis from the government was Modi’s address to the nation on 18 March announcing a “Janata curfew” on Sunday 22 March from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m., during which only essential workers would be allowed to leave their homes; at 5 p.m., people were asked to come out onto their doorsteps or balconies and clap or ring bells to express gratitude to frontline staff. Then, at 8 p.m. on 24 March, Modi announced a three-week total lockdown beginning at midnight, just four hours after the announcement. There was panic buying as people rushed to the shops to stock up on essentials, throwing social distancing to the winds. But the worst impact was on informal workers, especially inter-state or intra-state migrants. As transport shut down and they lost their livelihoods and were evicted from their accommodation, tens of millions of them trekked back to their villages on foot, on bicycles, or in any way they could: desperate journeys over hundreds of miles. The sheer scale of the exodus and the heart-breaking scenes, including hundreds dying of exhaustion, dehydration, starvation, accidents and police brutality, compelled the mainstream media (apart from BJP propaganda outlets) to cover what was happening.

#### **The Background: Workers Deprived of Rights**

In all countries, workers who do not have the option of working from home have been hit harder by COVID-19 lockdowns, but there are two reasons why the fallout in India has been especially

devastating. The first is the long-term denial of rights to informal workers, who constitute 93 per cent of the labour force, which will be examined briefly in this section; the second is the way the lockdown was implemented, which will be examined in the next.

Since Independence, successive governments have kept the vast majority of the labour force, both urban and rural, as informal workers, deprived of the labour rights originally enjoyed by the small number of formal workers, although today under attack by the BJP. Informal labour is found not just in the informal sector – that is, workplaces which are exempted from labour legislation covering the registration of workers, conditions of work, health and safety, and protection from victimisation and arbitrary dismissal – but also in the formal sector, where temporary, casual and so-called “contract workers”, who are really no-contract workers hired via a labour contractor, are a large and expanding part of the workforce. These workers are in theory entitled to minimum wages and union rights, but in practice the fact that they have no proof of employment means that they can be dismissed at any time without legal redress. And while social security and welfare benefits are far from adequate for any workers in India, they are almost completely absent for this section.

It is therefore no surprise that most informal workers suffer from very low wages, often not paid on time or sometimes not paid at all, and appalling living conditions in slums where each water tap and toilet is shared by hundreds of residents. For migrant workers, estimated as being 120 million in 2014 and now several millions more, conditions are even worse. The inability to find long-term employment keeps them on the move, travelling to wherever they have a chance of finding temporary or seasonal work, leaving their families behind in their home villages, often sleeping in their workplaces or sharing rented rooms with other migrants. Unlike more settled informal workers, they lack even the right to subsidised rations through the Public Distribution System, which is tied to an address and not portable. But even for settled informal workers, who have managed to bring their spouses and children to join them, the lack of social security means that they retain their links to elderly, disabled and unemployed relatives eking out a living on little plots in their villages of origin, to whom they send money whenever they can.

It was entirely predictable, then, that the lockdown would render the vast majority of migrant workers jobless and homeless, and that even a section of the more settled informal workers, having lost their incomes, would want to return to their home villages. Lack of adequate protective equipment put frontline women health and community care workers at high risk of contracting the disease while their stipends remained below the minimum wage. The lives of sanitary workers, mainly Dalits, always at risk due to lack of protective clothing and equipment, were put in even greater jeopardy.

### **A Botched Operation or Deliberate Cruelty?**

At first it appeared as though the massive reverse migration triggered by the lockdown was a result of the Modi government’s incompetence and ignorance. But soon evidence emerged that the policy of keeping migrant workers where they were was dictated by the interests of employers, who wanted these workers to be available immediately when the lockdown was lifted, even as they refused to pay anything towards the costs of food and accommodation for them. The horrific cruelty with which workers who defied this requirement were treated – beaten by the police, sometimes resulting in disablement or death, incarcerated in stadiums converted into prisons, sprayed with chlorine disinfectant, and denied food, water or shelter in the blazing heat – is one indication of a government marching in lockstep with business interests. A more direct

indication was the Ministry of Home Affairs Directive of 19 April 2020 prohibiting the movement of workers out of the states in which they were currently located but allowing for their transportation within the state to work in industrial, manufacturing and construction work as required: effectively being subjected to forced labour and treated as a factor of production rather than human beings.

However, workers persisted in their attempts to exercise their freedom, and the public outcry over the way they were being treated grew so loud that by the beginning of May the government was forced to state that it was allowing buses and trains to carry workers home. But the conditions were punishing, even when these trips actually materialised, which did not always happen. Sometimes workers were required to pay for medical certificates confirming they were COVID-free: almost impossible, given the virtual collapse of the healthcare system by this time. Workers without smartphones had to register online, on badly designed websites that often didn't work, before they set out. And bankrupt as they were, they had to pay the full fare, which necessitated borrowing money if they wanted to travel by "Shramik" trains.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the already-existing Prime Minister's National Relief Fund, Modi set up a PM CARES fund into which nearly a billion dollars flowed within a week. There was also a huge excess stock of food grains in the country at the time. It would have been possible to provide free food to informal workers wishing to stay in the cities, free transport to those trying to return to their villages, and emergency funding to enable their home states to quarantine them and expand the food and employment available under the Food Security Act and National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) initiated by the previous Congress government. But none of this happened. Much-publicised relief measures turned out to be a drop in the ocean of what was required. The grotesque irony of the situation is illustrated by the fact that the Indian Railways contributed around Rs 1.6 billion to the PM CARES fund, yet neither the Railways nor the fund thought fit to pay the fares of migrant workers!

The claim that workers were prevented from going home in order to shield their villages from the virus is contradicted by a study showing that migrants who went home at the beginning of the lockdown did not carry the virus with them, but those who returned later, after it had spread in urban slums, were much more likely to be infected. Many more migrants would have died if not for a major mobilisation of civil society, with activists rapidly organising support for them and many ordinary people contributing whatever they could.

What accounts for such callousness? The Prime Minister's address to the nation on Sunday 29 March is illuminating. In it he said, "We *Bharatvasis* [Indian citizens] will together fight this crisis. But please be sensitive to the *garib* [poor]". These sentences depict migrants not as workers contributing to India's GDP but as beggars dependent on charity, while simultaneously robbing them of their identity as Indian citizens. They were thus subjected to a three-fold denial of their rights: as workers, as citizens and, as we saw earlier, as human beings. Nor is their exclusion from the category of *Bharatvasis* merely a figure of speech: if they are registered to vote, it would be in their home villages; typically, they would neither be given leave to go home to vote, nor would they be able to afford it. It has taken the upheaval of the pandemic to highlight their effective disenfranchisement. In response, Citizens for Justice and Peace (CJP) and other like-minded organisations launched a campaign to obtain for them the right to cast their votes through postal ballots.

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<sup>1</sup> "Shramik" means "labour". These were meant to be special trains taking labourers home to their villages. At first, the Modi government claimed it was paying 85 per cent of the fare, but this did not happen. The Shramik trains were badly run, with some taking days longer to reach their destinations than they normally would; passengers were given no access to food or water, resulting in several deaths (Mishra, 2020).

## Conclusion

If millions of workers persisted in their efforts to travel to their home villages despite the sadistic treatment they received from the state, that in itself was a declaration of their humanity, dignity and agency. But fighting for the labour rights of informal workers requires a more organised trade union struggle, while a campaign for the voting rights of migrant workers, at a time when all democratic rights are under attack, entails the involvement of an even wider constituency. Whether these will materialise remains to be seen.

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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