

The Rejects: COVID-19 Migrants, Victims of Discrimination

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Abstract: The villages of India remain entrenched in the ancient hierarchical shackles of caste. The most severe impact of divisions of caste is faced by the people belonging to the lower castes. Accompanying caste is the provision of marginalization which is often the result of their low position in society both in terms of societal status and economic status. People hailing from lower castes often remain confined to low paying professions creating a vicious cycle of poverty and marginalization. People belonging to these sections of population migrate to cities for more job opportunities as well as to escape the problems of caste based regulations and discriminations within villages. This migration pattern of movement from villages to cities received a sudden jolt with the onset of COVID 19 pandemic. The COVID 19 pandemic, which is responsible for one of the most stringent lockdowns of history had opened up the space for a new demographic change, the large scale migration of labourers, especially from cities to villages, their hometowns. Apart from the demographic effect, the lockdown, loss of jobs as a result and migration had had a deep impact on the personal lives of the migrant labourers. The journey of a migrant labourer from city, place of work, to their own village after losing their job had proved to be perilous and long. But travelling long distances without facilities or supplies had not been their only cause of misery but many had to face caste based discriminations and marginalization in their home towns too at the hands of their fellow villagers. This paper would try to analyse the condition of a migrant labourer belonging to lower caste and understand the purviews of discrimination faced by them after returning to their villages within the lens of COVID 19 pandemic induced lockdown.

Keywords: Caste, COVID-19, Discrimination, Migration, Migrant labourer, Labourer, Lockdown.

1. Introduction

“Distressed we are in cities; but we escaped the social regression of caste system imposed on in the village.” (*The untouchables: COVID-19 lockdown and the migrants, Richard Mahapatra: Down to Earth, 11th May, 2020*).

“The villagers were scared of contracting the coronavirus disease, so they didn’t touch me. *Otherwise, I would have been killed that day,*” (In UP villages, migrant workers allege harassment upon return, *Chandan Kumar: hindustantimes, 10th May, 2020*) ‘*dukhiyaron ka caste*’ (‘Caste is deeply ingrained in our social system ... but an emergency like a pandemic gives jolts and shocks to it’, *Avijit Ghosh: Opinion, Times of India, 3rd June, 2020*)

“Most of the villagers who have returned home belong to the

lower castes. The upper caste villagers harass us more. An upper caste villager started abusing me one day just because I was standing on the roof of my house. Even though I am not infected, the villagers fear that I will spread the coronavirus even from roof of my house.” (In UP villages, migrant workers allege harassment upon return, *Chandan Kumar: hindustantimes, 10th May, 2020*)

The above written short excerpts are the witnesses of the pains, agony and trouble the migrant labourers had to go through after their strenuous journey of coming back to their homes, their sought after refuge. As can be guessed from above lines in this paper we will try and analyse the problems of the returning migrants of COVID 19 using the interplay of social lenses of caste and marginalization.

India is a country entrenched in deep sets of caste hierarchy which quite seemingly also coincides with the class ladder. Nowhere it is more pronounced than that of villages of India, where people who belong to lower castes are confined to only certain low paying occupations, hindering their capability to rise above and get a better life, incidentally due to the nature of their work they are also stuck into the lowest income groups creating a low class position as well.

This was the fact of life for many, but unfortunately most of us, city dwellers were unaware of it. But it was COVID 19 pandemic lockdown and the exodus of mass migration which had presented us the glaring unfortunate picture of a return migrants’ village life, the apparent refuge of them.

Migration which in essence defines the movement of people from one place to another is a very common feature of the contemporary nation. While the people of India are quite familiar with the word migrant but its exact connotation and depth was not realised properly until recently.

A common feature of developing India, the typical migration pattern of labourers moving from rural villages to urban centres in search of opportunities is an intimate yet usual part of our daily life. But with the unprecedented situation of COVID 19 pandemic which had forced the Government to ensue ‘nationwide lockdown’ had led to the closing of businesses and professions, resulting in loss of jobs for the migrant labourers prompting them to return to their villages many a them on their foot.

“It took us 6 days to reach our village. We moved in large

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groups of more than a thousand people who did not know each other. But all of us just wanted to get to our homes. We'd eat whatever the people by the highway were distributing and lie down when we couldn't go on anymore. No CM, no government helped us..."(The returned migrants: Can Uttar Pradesh manage to provide them livelihood?, SruthinLal and Dibyaudh Das: Asiaville, 7th June, 2020)

The above written line are the words of Ajay a migrant labourer of Budh Dana village of Uttar Pradesh who had just returned from Faridabad on foot after the Government proclaimed lockdown. He worked in a shoe factory and now is trying to look for other options. His words of distress and frustration are a very correct portrayal of the dire situation of migrants who are returning to their villages. These migrants mostly returned in large groups at times on foot which further exacerbated the chances of infection. Also they were forced to return with no or very little savings without any food or water solely depending on the food distribution centres located on highways. There was immense physical and psychological strain on the migrants especially women and children. Even after the Government took notice of them they were often packed in buses or Shramik trains where huge numbers of them were huddled up together risking infection and in certain cases death. In certain areas health workers doused them with disinfectants which further eroded their human dignity. In such cases they are again relegated to their prior known 'sub-human' state where their human status is at question itself and not just their dignity.

But the problems of the migrants do not end here. The return migrants mostly, labourers often belong to the lower castes, who have the least amount of land or no land at all for irrigation and they are often forced to take up millennial jobs to feed their mouths. The villages of India where there is a strict code of social conduct had reduced the migrants to lowest rungs of the society. One may put the argument that situations like pandemic and extreme crises break the social boundaries of caste or class and people of a community come together to help each other out. But this was not the case for return migrants of states like Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, Maharashtra where the migrant labourers have been victims of discrimination from both sides, one they were forced to take up quarantine near their villages which was compulsory as a cautionary action against corona and on the other hand they had to face the regressive caste system, due to their belonging in the lower castes which got even more aggravated due to the fear of corona and misinformation.

Many cases were reported from the villages where the villagers were not allowed to cross geographical boundaries of their villages even after going through government approved rigorous quarantine. For example, in Odisha, people had gone to the High Court to get a ruling that only villagers free from corona be allowed to enter, fortunately this ruling was halted by the Supreme Court. In west Singhbhum district of Jharkhand migrants belonging to the tribal regions faced similar kinds of discrimination, many were not allowed to enter the village quarantine and the police were forced to move them to other areas. Shamu Munda who had just returned from Telengana

said, "When was taken to a quarantine centre in my village, the locals opposed it saying that I am carrying the virus. They even prevented my family members to meet me. I had no symptoms and I even offered to get myself tested. They did not listen. The police then took me to another quarantine centre,"

In other areas many labourers belonging to the lower castes were harassed by the upper caste villagers. In Basti, a village in eastern Uttar Pradesh, Shekhar was surrounded by villagers armed with sticks. The villagers were angry with him because Shekhar, a returned migrant labourer had ventured outside the Primary school where he was quarantined to relieve himself. "The villagers were scared of contracting the coronavirus disease, so they didn't touch me. Otherwise, I would have been killed that day, they hurled abuses at me and threatened to beat me if I ventured out of the school" Shekhar said.

The harassment was not confined to the villages only, many labourers who lived as tenants in the cities had faced discrimination at the hands of their landlords. They had become the perpetual outsiders 'baharwale' of the area while the landlords being the original inhabitants 'mool vasis'. In Delhi NCR and Noida region, it remains a major destination for north Indian migrants that form a sizeable group among the internal migrants in the country. They work as street vendors, construction workers, security guards, housemaids, etc., living in rented accommodation in the urban villages of the city. Local villagers derive a significant income from these rentals. In most villages, a landlord has dozens of identical rooms for rent, set in rows on floors in narrow alleyways. Most house owners also run grocery shops from which tenants are expected to make their purchase. But after the spread of the virus things have been difficult, often these migrant workers are considered the carriers of the virus and the landlords fear further 'cultural contamination' Aggravating this discrimination are the misperceptions and stereotyping of the migrants such as people hailing from these regions are unhygienic in nature to their different food practices allegedly risk spreading of the virus more. On the other hand, the tenants also bear a dim view of their landlords basing their behaviour on unearned privileges of living near a city.

The COVID 19 pandemic lockdown which had created a large exodus of return migration of labourers had shed light to some of the harsh realities which had remained in background for too long. Looking back into the economic sufferings of the migrants, one might blame the neo-liberal economic system, government's apathy towards them. "We see them everywhere. Yet, we never imagined migrant workers as a group big enough to be taken seriously", a line by Irudaya Rajan, faculty at the Centre for Development Studies in Thiruvananthapuram hit us with the realization of our ignorance of knowledge of the fact that the migrant labourers a daily presence of our life could be capable of posing such a big problem when they come together. Fusing the less than human treatment of migrant bodies by certain health workers with the current situation poses a more severe blow to their self-esteem, human dignity, future and life in general.

A larger blow to their already fragile self was the discrimination and the harsh treatment the migrant labourers

had to face back home. For many of the returned labourers the vicious nexus of caste and class had worked in a way to reduce their villages, their refuge to torture chambers.

Most of the returned migrant labourers belong to the lower castes, they had moved to cities not only to find better job opportunities but also to escape the hardships of the regressive caste system of the village. It is true that in villages living conditions might be better and returning to their homes might give access to communal vegetable grounds of the village but this was not the life of many. In villages the migrants belonging to lower castes were stigmatised by the upper caste not only due to their caste position but due to their cause of return. The whole village shunned them and misinformation and panic made the villagers believe them to be carrier of the virus even after testing negative and going through prescribed quarantine.

In many areas the migrants were mainly Scheduled castes and tribes and lived on the fringes of the village society they had very little irrigable land or little education decreasing their choices. There were some who didn't have the BPL card or the ration card or proper information about government help leading to a lack of access to the government sponsored ration making them vulnerable further.

Therefore, we see that in the social hierarchy dictated society in India, the case of marginalization is especially acute in villages. A child of a lower caste is fated to dwelling the fringes of his society, separated from the main stream; they are constantly confronted with social discrimination. Belonging to a specific caste confined them to certain professions only, usually meagre and low paying ones which further decreased their skill capacity and chances of education or the prospect of holding any land leading to a poor unsatisfactory life. In order to escape this life, many people moved to cities to work as migrants where they were able to escape the caste discrimination. According to Professor Rajendra Prasad Mangain of National Institute of Rural Development and Panchyati Raj, Hyderabad, "aspiration for a better quality of life and access to better education are also major factors behind out-migration. Those belonging to Scheduled Castes or other vulnerable communities, tend to migrate out and leave behind their identity and social stigma attached to their identity in the villages. So not only do they get better wages, but they also leave behind the social stigma," But the COVID 19 pandemic took away their jobs leaving them without any option but to return to their home villages.

However, the road to home is not a simple one for the return migrants even if they stay strong at the face of erosion of dignity with dousing of disinfectant at the hands of officials and are able to take the physical strain of long distance, there was no guarantee that they would be welcome in the society. The sudden imposition of the world's most stringent lockdown has turned around 500 million citizens into 'Nowhere' people. Their great exodus from cities to villages remind us of the great refugee exodus 1971. While they move by collective will to their homes to find comfort and families, they are often turned away even lathi charged at borders, denied entry to do their own homes. Migrant Workers-the vehicle of corona virus, the notion that returning migrant labourers are carrying the

corona had created another of discrimination levied upon them, now not only they were discriminated against because they were low caste but also people refused to touch or go near them or even let them enter the village grounds on the assumption that they are carrying a deadly virus with them. One may assume that the main reason behind this discrimination is solely lack of education among the residences but there is another aspect which comes into play and that is prejudices of the so called educated people who even after availing the necessary education nurture the belief that those people belonging to castes lower than that of them must be the carrier of the virus. Compounded with their current situation, the low savings and almost no new option of work aided their economic hardship along with social ones. Despaired of getting work in their villages, often unable to buy a spade for MNREGA jobs, they are standing in no man's land, like refugees in their own village, own country.

2. Conclusion

We may conclude that, contrary to the popular belief, many migrant workers never got their fairy tale ending of happiness after reaching their apparent place of psychological comfort, their own home in their villages. Migrant labourers who were forced to travel long distances to reach home were sufferers of a gambit of betrayals both by state and society. The utter negligence and lack of sympathy from the governmental sector had drove them to use any means possible to reach home often leading to very dangerous situations. After arrival, they were again trapped in deep fissures of nexus caste and class dictations of the society, a place which they consider home. Years of historical discrimination, blended with absence of economic opportunities and closing of the only outlet made them prey of the double discrimination, double victimization in the hands of predatory elements of society reducing them to utter vulnerability and haplessness.

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