

Five issues hidden behind the exodus of India's migrant labour under the Covid-19 lockdown.

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[2 Comments on Five issues hidden behind the exodus of India's migrant labour under the Covid-19 lockdown.](#)

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If there is anything positive that has come out of the multiple crises created by Covid-19, it is that, in India, the world's most draconian lockdown drew public attention to not only the plight but the existence of armies of vulnerable migrant workers. On 24 March 2020, Indians were given just four hours by their Prime Minister to prepare for weeks, maybe months, of being holed in their homes. Though several hundred flights were organised through the government's 'Vande Bharat Mission' to repatriate [thousands of middle class Indians](#) from one comfort across the world to another at home, the hundred million migrants, living and working hand-to-mouth, far away from their homes, were left to fend for themselves.

With no work and no way to feed themselves, removed from their kinship and family support networks, millions had no choice but to defy the lockdown and [take to their feet](#) to return to their distant villages. One after another they marched, carrying their belongings on their heads and backs, children on their shoulders, walking thousands of kilometres, determined to find a way home, capturing the imagination of the world. Yet, [our research](#) published this week in *Transactions of Institute of British Geographers*, reveals five issues that remain hidden behind their exodus.

First, as is the case in most parts of the world, big business and industry in India is dependent on migrant labour that is paid less, and works longer, harder and more flexibly than local labour. Though in many parts of the world such a precarious migrant workforce travels across national borders, in India there is a huge internal migrant force traversing internal state borders to do informal contract work in more developed parts of the country. Usually unable to speak the lingua franca of the places they migrate to, unable to carry over many of their citizenship rights, rarely represented by any union or social movement, they are easily harassed by employers, government institutions and by other workers. This vulnerability makes migrant labour easily controlled, cheap and dispensable.

Second, in India, many of these migrants – [about 100 million](#) in total – work seasonally and circulate between their rural homes to far away work sites in more developed parts of the country for a part of the year. When work stops, for instance in the monsoons, they will have to return home. They will often work in one site one year and in a completely different one, the next.



Photo credit: Jens Lerche. See <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12401>

Third, there is a geopolitical dimension to these migration patterns. Workers who are treated the worst often come from Indian regions such as Jharkhand, Odisha or Chhattisgarh which have long suffered a form of [internal colonialism](#). Their indigenous wealth – whether minerals, forests or other natural resources – has been stolen by outsiders leaving little but poverty for the locals. These regions, made poor over the centuries, are now providing bodies for the lowest rungs of the labour hierarchy in more developed parts of the country.

Fourth, India's formerly 'untouchable' and tribal groups, Dalits and Adivasis, are overly represented in the seasonal labour migrant workforce across the country and often do the hardest work in the worst conditions. The official estimate is that they make up more than 40% of the seasonal migrants even though they are only 25% of the population. These historically disadvantaged minorities are today used for the most dangerous, strenuous and polluting of all work in the modern economy. These workers are subject to the stigmas of caste and region in their places of work, treated as filthy, or *jungli* (uncivilised, wild and savage), or BIMARU (a Hindi word for illness, often used to refer to the general poverty and underdevelopment of states such as Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand), including by the local workforce. The anthropologist, Jan Breman once reported that seasonal migrant Adivasi and low caste migrant cane-cutters in Gujarat said about themselves, 'even dogs are better off'.

Fifth, seasonal migrant workers are supported by an invisible economy of care, centred around the household. These migrants can only be workers because of the work undertaken

across generations by others at home, including care provided by the spouse, children, siblings, and elderly parents, all of whom care for the migrant worker when there is no work, keep the migrants' home running so that they have a place to return to, and who will care for them in old age when their bodies have been so used by employers that they are no longer fit to work. The invisible economies of care also encompass the land, forests and livestock that provide a livelihood for this kin at home in the village throughout their life-cycle. Making these economies of care invisible is what allows employers – whether in factories, kilns or construction sites – to steal the value of workers and their households, making them so cheap to employ. Seasonal migrant workers are not only exploited, they are super-exploited.

Is change possible?

Rather than protect migrant workers, state appetite firmly points to making things worse as [labour legislation is being dismantled](#) in further favour of business and industry. Moreover, the obstacles to mobilising are many. Language barriers, treatment of migrants as second-class citizens, and permanent transience lead to isolation. Employers actively clamp down on attempts to organise through private security firms and by placing labour from different states and groups at the same worksite making it hard for them to unite.

There are rare individuals and groups in India, such as [Aajeevika Bureau](#), who have organised and agitated for such precarious workers, to better the conditions of those who are invisible to most of the rest of us. But many of them have faced increasing state repression in recent years. The Maoist or 'Urban Naxal' label has been used to discredit and silence the most radical of labour organising, allowing the state to use draconian anti-terror laws and incarcerate alleged suspects for years without even providing a charge-sheet let alone bring them to trial. There are examples of this from all over India, [for instance, the Maruti workers of Manesar, or those who drew attention to their plight](#) like Anand Teltumbde (now in jail), those representing [informal workers at Reliance Energy \(now Adani Electricity\) in Mumbai](#), those fighting for contract workers in the informal economy [like Sudha Bhardwaj, also now in jail](#), and [the former IAS officer and activist Harsh Mander](#), who has written some of the most damning reports on the exploitation and oppression of migrant labour, also now targeted.



Photo credit: Jens Lerche. See <https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12401>

But there is also a silver lining to the impact of Covid-19, in that it has brought together people from across India to provide relief for stranded migrant workers. In different parts of the country, thousands became involved in finding temporary shelter, providing food and basic amenities for the needy. They walked into migrant colonies, relied on local knowledge or [used telephone helplines to locate the vulnerable](#). Journalists, scholars and activists got involved in documenting their flight. Some did so quietly. Others wrote [diaries](#). Still others marched with the migrants and penned their stories in national and international newspapers, or filmed what they witnessed for television and social media. The Indian Society for Labour Economics wrote an [urgent letter](#) to the Prime Minister for the short-term relief of vulnerable workers. Labour migration appeared in mainstream Indian policy discussions for the first time, and scholars and activists who had been working with migrant labour for years were for once listened to as online conferences, seminars and reports emerged to try to understand what was going on.

Now is a ripe moment to harness all these efforts, unite them in a wider movement for social change that will better the terms and conditions of migrant workers. If there is anything that [our long-term work on seasonal migrant workers](#) in India has shown, it is that any effort must consider at least three things. The first is that not only is there urgent need for better conditions and pay of the worker in the place of work, but it is the entire invisible economy of care that needs improved remuneration. The second is the need for the persistent fight against caste, tribe and region-based stigmatisation, including by other workers, that oppress migrants. And finally, the need to start reversing the long histories of internal colonialism and uneven development in India which force people to move into such vulnerable conditions in places of work in the first place. These are the hidden truths that lie behind the exodus of migrant workers.

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This post builds on the recent paper: Shah, A. and Lerche, J. (2020), Migration and the Invisible Economies of Care: Production, Social Reproduction and Seasonal Migrant Labour in India. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* doi:[10.1111/tran.12401](https://doi.org/10.1111/tran.12401) (Available Open Access)

This is an extended version of an article that appeared in the Hindustan Times. That article can be viewed here: <https://www.hindustantimes.com/analysis/the-five-truths-about-the-migrant-workers-crisis-opinion/story-awTQUm2gnJx72UWbdPa5OM.html>

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