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The five truths about the migrant workers' crisis | Opinion



Rather than protecting migrant workers, the government is now making things worse as labour legislation is dismantled further in favour of business and industry (Parwaz Khan / Hindustan Times)

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By Alpa Shah and Jens Lerche

If anything positive has come out of the Covid-19 crisis, it is that the world's most stringent lockdown revealed the plight of the vulnerable Indian migrant labour force. With no work and no way to feed themselves, removed from family support, millions had no choice but to defy the lockdown and return to their villages. One after another, they marched, carrying their belongings and children, walking thousands of kilometres, determined to find a way home, capturing the imagination of the world. [Our research article](#) just published by the *Royal Geographical Society* (Institute of British Geographers) reveals five issues that remain largely hidden behind their exodus.

First, business and industry is dependent on migrant labour that is paid less, works longer and harder, and is more flexible than local labour. Though, in many parts of the world, such a precarious migrant workforce travels across national borders, in India, it is a huge internal migrant force traversing state borders for informal contract work in more developed parts of the country where they are treated as second-class citizens. Usually unable to speak the *lingua franca* of where they migrate to, rarely represented by any union or social movement, they are easily harassed by employers, government institutions and by other workers. This vulnerability makes them more 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 and faraway work sites for a part of the year.

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Third, workers treated the worst often come from regions of India like Jharkhand, Odisha or Chhattisgarh which have long suffered a form of internally oppressive structures as their indigenous wealth — minerals, forests, other natural resources — has been extracted by outsiders, leaving little but high levels of poverty for the locals.

Fourth, the hardest work in the worst living conditions is done by India's historically disadvantaged minorities. Dalits and Adivasis are overly represented as seasonal labour migrants; they make up more than 40% of the seasonal migrant workforce even though they are only 25% of the population. Whether in the tea plantations of Kerala, chemical industrial factories of Tamil Nadu or road-building in Himachal Pradesh, we found the cheapest and most exploited workers were low caste and tribal seasonal migrants from the central and eastern Indian forested belts, doing work that even local Adivasis and Dalits were moving away from. All these migrant workers are subject to the stigmas of caste and region, treated as *jungli* (filthy or savage), including by the local workforce.

Fifth, these seasonal migrant workers are, in turn, supported by a further invisible economy — the household. Seasonal migrants can only be workers because of all the work undertaken across generations at home, including care provided by the spouse, children, siblings and elderly parents. This is the labour of kin who will care for the migrant workers in the seasons when there is no work, who will maintain the migrants' home so they have a place to return to, and who will care for them when employers have overworked their bodies so they are no longer fit to work. Making these economies of care invisible allows employers — in factories, kilns and construction sites — to steal the value of both workers and their households, make them so cheap that they can accumulate from them. Seasonal migrant workers are, therefore, not just exploited, they are super-exploited.

Rather than protecting migrant workers, the government is now making things worse as labour legislation is dismantled further in favour of business and industry. The obstacles to mobilising are many. Language barriers, treating migrants as second-class citizens and permanent transience lead to isolation. The rare individuals and organisations, which have organised and agitated for such precarious workers, have faced increasing State repression in recent years, with the Maoist or Urban Naxal label used to discredit and silence the most radical of labour activists.

But there is also a silver lining to the impact of Covid-19. It brought together thousands to provide relief for stranded migrant workers, find temporary shelters, and provide basic amenities. Journalists, scholars and activists documented their flight. Labour migration appeared in mainstream 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 tried to understand what was going on.

Now is the moment to harness all these efforts, unite them in a wider movement for social change that will better the terms and conditions for migrant workers. If there is anything that our long-term work on seasonal migrant workers in India has shown, it is the need to consider three things: First, better conditions and pay must be adopted, both for the workers' households and for the workers in their place of work. Second, tackling discrimination against caste, tribe and region-based migrants is a must to lift oppression. Finally, the internal

oppressive structures that drive countrywide uneven development, which forces people to move into such vulnerable conditions in places of work in the first place, must be reversed.

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