

Covid Lockdown and Migrant Labour

Some conceptual issues
(Draft notes)

Manoranjan Mohanty
mmohantydu@gmail.com

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Introduction

On 24 March 2020 when an all India lockdown was declared by the Prime Minister with only a four-hour notice, as a necessary step to prevent the spread of the Covid-19 virus in India the section of Indian people that was hit the hardest about their location and livelihood was the migrant labour.

In trying to respond to their plight, social workers, government officials and scholars have tried to study the phenomenon and suggest measures and help get some concrete assistance.

The Migrant Labour Initiative (MLI) of the Development Research Institute (DRI) of Gabeshana Chakra has been actively discussing, sharing and intervening in the case of the Odisha workers during this period. Several notes have been prepared and shared. I wish to place a few general points about concepts, data and the larger perspective. I wish to highlight the fact that while the neo-liberal economy made informalisation its creed and had created enormous uncertainties and insecurities for labour in general and informal sector labour in particular, Covid-19 put them in the most miserable condition bringing forth new challenges.

Two perspectives

In all studies, policy and politics two perspectives on labour are always sharply evident. One is to recognise labour as an AGENCY and another to treat them as an object of charity and welfare.

As agency labour is the principal builder of life and creator of civilisation. As the vast majority of the population, labour applies knowledge and energy to produce value in all spheres, agriculture, manufacturing, services, environment and others.

Rulers devalue labour, often unfairly divide them into a gradation of skills and hierarchical social groups and dissociate them from the decision-making process. They even seek to disenfranchise them as much as possible so that they cannot organise themselves effectively to control the production and related processes. They mobilise them in multiple ways to serve the rulers' objectives and interests, making the labour more and more dependent on the mercy of the rulers. In the neo-liberal phase of market economy and digital communications, this process of disempowerment of labour reached its zenith. The plight of the millions of migrant labour under the Covid-19 lockdown demonstrated their helplessness. And the response of the system that we already see is one of charity and temporary sustenance.

Political movements of working classes and oppressed groups had won big battles asserting that charity and compassion for the marginalised are not what is required, the system must recognise their legitimate needs. This was the call in revolutionary movements and anti-colonial struggles. The welfare state evolved under capitalism with the state providing positive support to the urban population, workers, peasants and masses in general in spheres of health, education and economic activities. Socialist countries were committed to this outlook. It was practiced first in some European countries and then in newly independent

countries. But very soon the continuity of the exploitative process became more and more evident and as people's democratic consciousness grew there was a growing demand for treating the demands as rights, human rights. The right to basic livelihood needs such as food, shelter, education, health, work and cultural identity gradually emerged as universally recognised rights.

The present situation of providing responses to the migrant workers' problems must not be divorced from this history of a long struggle for the rights of labour. While temporary food arrangement, quarantine, health check-up and cash allowance for a couple of months are immediate needs, the socio-economic condition of poverty and destitution which pushed most of them to far off places must be the focus of policy and social action. To treat them as objects of charity shall not be tolerated for long by the working people who are already conscious of their role as an agency. When protests broke out in Surat or Mumbai or Delhi and some other places this was the message.

From Migrant labour to Mobile Livelihood

Migrant labour studies had a few limitations as it did not always put mobility in the larger process of the political economy. Moreover, the mobility of people for livelihood has been a part of human history. As communications develop mobility also expands, intra-region, inter-region, international and cross-continental. So the recent thinking of migration experts is to study mobility of labour, its nature, purpose, causes and consequences. The Covid experience brings out these aspects, some clearly some in more complex ways.

The point to examine is to what extent migration is caused by distress conditions in the place of origin. The conditions of socio-economic inequality and regional disparity that resulted in distress migration must be investigated. The long-standing distinction between economic migration and distress migration becomes relevant here. Ganjam workers in Surat may reflect economic migration to an extent. Brick Kiln workers from Kalahandi in Telengana may be mostly in the distressed category. The responses to their plight can be studied keeping this in mind.

Forms and Kind

Arjun Sengupta Committee used the term "Workers in the Unorganised Sector of the Economy" instead of using the term "informal labour". Informal labour, casual labour, contract labour, construction worker are used for this category. Many of them are also migrant labour. They may be working in a firm, an enterprise, a company or a construction project or some such sector. They may be in small or big units, in manufacturing or services etc.. Many of them may be self-employed labour like plumbers and electricians or technicians. Another category may be getting regular salaries, but do not have written contracts about their working conditions and wages and they are estimated to be as many as 77% of 'regular employees'. In other words, their employers cannot be taken to court for the payment of their dues.

What is common to all of them is insecurity in wages, working conditions, and in most cases poverty and vulnerability in livelihood conditions. Political organisation is nearly absent in undertaking their cause with a few exceptions. For example, in a few areas there are organisations of construction workers. The bulk of the informal sector labour and migrant labour come from Dalit, OBC, Adivasi sections and poor rural families. Ever since Shankar

Guha Niyogi led the Chhattisgarh Mines Shramik Sangh (CMSS) in Dalli-Rajhara in the 1980s some new political initiatives to organise the contract workers have been taken in different parts of the country. But still, they remain a neglected dimension of the Trade Union Movement in India.

Several Laws have been passed from time to time to provide some rights and some security to the unorganised workers. We must bring them to the discussion and ensure their implementation. Many of them are unacceptable to the present regime which prompted them to replace most of the laws with new Labour Codes which greatly deprive rights and security to all workers and strengthen the hands of the employers in the name of providing a conducive atmosphere to accelerate economic growth.

Data problem

Experts have complained that the migration data from the 2011 Census are still not published. Various estimates of migrant labour in different sectors and indifferent States are put out by different sources. The present crisis must give rise to systematically compile accurate data.

We have some reported numbers:

Estimates of informal labour 400 to 450 million.

At least 90 % of the work force are informal labour.

About 40% of informal labour is in Construction activities.

Estimates of currently affected migrant labour range from 95 million to 143 million

Only 31 % of Migrant labourers are receiving any assistance,

44 % have curtailed their food intake and

Some 59 % of Migrant labourers are going hungry. (One survey data as of 16 April.)

CMIE: 14 crores have lost jobs since the lockdown.

The various States have given approximate numbers of their workers in other States and workers from other States in theirs. In the next few days, we should have the data.

Odisha Government: 86,000 labourers in 2610 Camps as on 26 April.

16,000 of them from within the State

6.5 lakhs Odia labourers working outside Odisha. (Others put it as above 10 lakhs)

5 lakhs are expected back when the lockdown is relaxed.

On 29 April nearly 300 labourers from Surat arrived in Ganjam.

Issues - Immediate

1. Enhanced PDS TO ALL: Temporary ration cards. (Do not insist on AADHAR)
2. Access to feeding centres to all.
3. Rs 7500 to each migrant labour per month for three months
4. Continuous health check-up and treatment

5. Implementation of MGNREGS fully matching the demand
6. Employment of all in appropriate ways, locally, regionally and in places where they could return with security.
7. Panchayats to use the occasion to reassert their immediate and long term role.
8. A survey by teachers and social workers in every Panchayat on the major aspects of the political economy.
9. Mutual support groups in villages and towns helping one another, coordinating with government and social action groups in pursuit of their Constitutional rights.
10. Local-regional-national-global links for exchange of information, sharing of resources and building solidarity.

Issues - Long term

1. Assets review at the village and towns: provision of land, credit and necessary capital support.
2. Food security in long term basis – not on relief pattern.
3. Universaling education
4. Universal healthcare
5. Local people's planning for employment, in old and new sectors, locally, regionally and beyond with security
6. MSMEs in the local region using local resources and linkages with larger enterprises, proving training, gearing education appropriately.
7. Environmental planning to protect natural resources, save energy, regenerate ecosystems, knowledge system and people's science.
8. Cultural Planning
9. People's Self-organisation - political initiatives by various social, occupational and functional groups for Constitutional vision and human rights.
10. Mutual cooperation links with regional, national, global networks