

Trampling hope, mockery of justice

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We often carry multiple identities. Some make us vulnerable while others may be the source of privilege, power or security; the 'native' and 'migrant' identities can be brought within this fold. Our cities become home for many persons who are migrants by definition through their mobility for prospects in employment and higher education. But it is only for some and a certain class of people and lives that the burden of this identity has fallen upon overwhelmingly, that is making us witness a humanitarian crisis in the country that is unprecedented, as an outcome of the pandemic.

News and visuals of women with luggage on their heads, a sleeping child on a wheeled suitcase dragged by her mother, a husband pulling an assembled cart with his pregnant wife and daughter in it, a family carrying their pet dog and duck that have surfaced over the past few weeks crisscrossing across various states and trudging thousands of miles - have occupied our lives and outraged us during the lockdown. The multiple media scapes have been packed with images and reports of streams of people on desperate and arduous homeward journeys motivated by deep economic anxieties and distress. They have been demonized for being stealthy, for defying the state's diktat and for exacerbating public health risks in the context of the pandemic, making their journeys fraught with fear, harassment and tragedy paying no heed to the kinds of uncertainties they face in their lives in their attempts for survival. Furthermore, these narratives of personal crises are slowly disappearing from the news and public, bringing about the dire need to reflect on how the workers have been treated by the state.

As glimpses of these realities appeared on television and other media, I was witness to them around me as I (with many other concerned individuals and organisations) attempted to support and coordinate access to rations and transport to healthcare for these individuals and communities whose struggles to survive had been disastrously magnified with the unpredictability of these times.



Hope: Stuck in the in between

In the early weeks of the lockdown, Suresh (*name changed*), a casual worker from Bihar living in South Delhi, ventured out to buy food and was beaten up by the police and threatened with dire consequences for "violating" the lockdown norms. When I met him, he explained that he had exhausted his food supplies and had been starving for three days, which prompted his attempt to get food. Having a pass allowed me to provide him with some ration that would last for a week. Subsequent coordination with a local group of concerned citizens in Suresh's area who were distributing

packets of home cooked food allowed Suresh some respite from hunger. He was, I realised, one of several families struggling to survive. From Bihar and Jharkhand, almost all of them were casual workers dabbling in whatever work was available or working as tailors in garment factories, and had been living in Delhi for varying periods of time. They had been without work and earnings for a couple of weeks already putting immense strain on their capacities to even eke out the hand to mouth existence that was the norm. With no money to pay the rent for their frugal accommodation in one of the *bastis*, nor for food and other basic needs, and with no respite in the lockdown, their return to work and wages looked increasingly bleak. Their distress was palpable and returning home to their villages was increasingly seen as their only escape to reclaim their lives, and to survive.

While Suresh and the community that he was part of were stranded in thought, concerns about the lack of clarity on the duration and nature of the lockdown, and their livelihoods and dire lives, led thousands of others from Rajasthan, Haryana, Punjab, Jammu, Delhi and Chhattisgarh, to embark on journeys that had already spanned several days and nights along highways and across cities, some by cycles and the others by

foot. The soaring temperatures, the constant fear of harassment and detention by police and other authorities and exhaustion remained their constant companions.

On [April 29](#), more than four weeks into the lockdown, the Central government finally announced that it would start special Shramik Express trains to enable workers to return to their home states. But the process was overwhelmed by challenges and added to people's anxieties. Conditionalities to be eligible for a train seat included medical certificates and other clearances from the destination state as well as the state that they were leaving. Even in these circumstances, they had to purchase the tickets for which a majority had insufficient resources or had none left after paying for them. Further, dealing with the government offices/departments that had to facilitate their travels through issuance of documents entailed extremely tedious procedures, that required shuttling from one office to another and multiple visits to varied locations in Delhi. This was made even more cumbersome in the absence of accurate information, limited functioning of public transport, and unimaginably long queues and outrageous chaos. In addition to this, the online application process that assumed the people's ownership and use of smartphones was ludicrous.

Little ways down the road: Narratives from the ground



While we struggled to try and negotiate the process to procure the documents and train tickets with Suresh and others in his community, there was an urgent need for water, masks, footwear and food for those who were walking through and past Delhi. A group I met on GT Karnal Road one day in the month of May was heading to Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh (UP) from Punjab, while another on Mathura road was on its way to Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh from Delhi.

There were women including a six month pregnant woman, at least four women carrying their newborns, infants and children, and men lugging heavy bundles of what they could take back of their present lives to their homes.

“Madam, we don't have any pass, but we have Aadhaar. We had registered at the police station 15 days back, but there was no response. We cannot pay rent any longer. The police threaten us. We are afraid that they will either force us to stay back or keep us in quarantine. We don't want to stay here. If we remain here, we will die of hunger, anxiety and fear. Instead of dying here, it is better to die in our homes.”

The information about the government's initiative of the Shramik Express train services and my discussion with them about the alternative of staying in Delhi for a few days instead of taking such an arduous journey in the heat was met with expressions that reposed no faith in the system:

“No madam, we don't have any faith as to when we will get the train, whether we will at all get it, we don't know.”

Rightfully so, given that the Government had not really given them any reason to have it. This was not particular to COVID or to the lockdown, but a long and callous construction of infinite injustice by the State.

On yet another day in the month of May, near the Badarpur border, we met a group who were walking from Jammu to their village in eastern UP. Among them was a young woman with a 10 day-old baby. They had already been walking for eight days; they believed that they would be able to reach their destination in another 10 days, provided they were not detained anywhere on the way. They began walking again after

their brief break in Haryana, when the police stopped them and began intimidating them with several questions.

The senior most police officer present was particularly severe and demanded to know how they had managed to come all this way like 'chor' [thieves]. They were rounded up and pushed into a truck including the woman with a ten day old child and threatened "chup chap chalo nahi to band kardenge" [go without a fuss or we'll lock you up], in response to some of the queries about where they were being taken. On intervening, we were informed reluctantly that they would be sent to the border, and further probing was met with a rude rejoinder to stop asking too many questions.



The group going to Chhattisgarh managed to find a truck that was willing to take them, which would save them several hours of walking. When I expressed concern about their safety following a reported mishap of another truck ferrying people, the refrain was:

"It's alright, madam. If accident has to happen, it will, at least the women and the kids can travel comfortably".

The people we met on the highways have been calling to share the progress in their journeys. Nevertheless their journeys were constantly gripped with stress - some of them had to hide in a truck to

evade the police while others were caught and detained for sometime; their negotiations with truck drivers and bus operators to make the journeys with the limited financial resources they had; and staying hydrated with water that people were distributing along the way and so on. Joyous tidings arrived from UP when they reached, despite their badly swollen legs and injured feet and overwhelming exhaustion, as they were taken to the quarantine centre. Almost home but not just yet.



Justice of what kind?

The response to a serious public health issue has tragically been through an authoritarian lockdown, and any deviation or challenge to the lockdown especially by the most vulnerable, regardless of the reasons for it, has been dealt with through force and criminalization that has been implemented by an aggressive and short-sighted state and police. Reports of such force have emerged from different corners of the country where people were trudging home from cities and towns and where people were prevented from accessing healthcare, or from reaching their families in emergencies etc., which has perhaps caused as much psychological distress and harm.

While the sudden lockdown stalled people's lives and opportunities to participate in economic activities necessary for their survival, it is incomprehensible that the Indian government with its vast resources could not coordinate and arrange safe travel for all those who wanted to return to their villages,

including those who were en-route. This is particularly telling given that the Centre mounted a massive mission titled "Vande Bharat" to bring back Indians stranded overseas, but did not show the same zeal within the country to facilitate the return of migrant workers to their [homes](#). The government remains largely paralysed while the mammoth exodus continues.

Unsurprising though, if we examine the perspectives of those institutions that are expected to protect them and uphold their rights. Instead, we see the [Chief Justice of India](#) responding to submissions that the Centre pay workers their wages, by asking the lawyer why the workers needed money when they were being fed – failing the people on innumerable fronts but particularly in the dispensation of justice. For almost all of the people I interacted with, the trauma of the preceding weeks of lockdown had convinced them to never return to the cities from their villages and homes if they could somehow avoid it. Every institution that was meant to protect and uphold their rights and support them, they believed, had instead breached their trust and created this situation of utter deprivation, indignity and distress. While the sense of abandonment is not particular to the current context of lockdown, the scale of it was perceived as the scale was unprecedented, so much so that the inequalities and discrimination or the lack of opportunities that they had attempted to escape, seemed to be still more tolerable than what the past several weeks enforced on them. The norms of ‘isolation’ and ‘distancing’ have quickly and evidently exposed the pre-existing distances in the social relationships of migrant labourers with the others in these cities. Forms of discrimination in these spaces have often been invisible and systemic through the social contracts of maintenance of livelihoods; precarious jobs, living conditions and other conditionalities and contingencies that are a reality for people and families belonging to these poor working-class communities in the cities. Discrimination then has always remained closer to us, albeit shrouded in a systemised manner that has normalised it. Identity within these spaces comes to be in a constant flux for those who inhabit it. Lockdowns dictated by poverty, caste, religion, gender had been worsened by the current one.

Journeys back to cities to seek employment and other opportunities seem inevitable, but can't the cities that have barely provided sustenance and precipitated deplorable humiliating living conditions, be transformed to become inclusive spaces that foster survival and dignity? Unfortunately, recent trends do not indicate this, and instead reflect deterioration in the recognition and exercise of people's rights. A key example is the compromising of labour laws, the sham of fiscal relief and several such. The horrific apathy and short sightedness of the government has been a central thread in the response to the pandemic. After seventy years of independence, the government's treatment of a substantial section of its citizenry in such an inhuman, undignified and unjust manner is a huge travesty of justice and democracy.

Their march home is a motion of no confidence.

The author is a public health practitioner associated with Jan Swasthya Abhiyan/ People's Health Movement and would like to acknowledge Ranjan De, Deepa, Keertana, Abhiti, Adsa and all the workers who had gone through the hardships. Photos with consent.