



PANDEMIC AND MIGRANT LABOURERS IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:—Nowadays, we are facing the most difficult times of our lives. With closing and lockdown, the whole world is on a halt. Many of us are feeling frightened, unsettled and unsure due to COVID-19. This global pandemic has not yet ended. It has not only affected our health but also has made us worried about our carrier/job/business, finances and personal life. Migrant labourers and the poorest people are facing the challenge of survival. This paper highlights the need to fully take into account the seriousness of the current scenario to be managed and to give more attention to uncertainties. This paper begins with conceptual clarity and meaning of “Pandemic and Epidemic” and “Migrant labourers” followed by description of impact of pandemic on migrant labourers’ life. This paper also analysis this scenario with the help of various social perspectives (like: Marxist and subaltern perspectives) and describes challenges for the migrant labourers and Indian government. The final section of the paper presents conclusion and gives some suggestions in this regard.

Keywords: - Pandemic, Epidemic, Migrant Labourers, COVID-19, Marxist perspective, Subaltern studies.

1. THE CONTEXT

We would like to begin by stating the reason that led us to undertake the study of pandemic and migrant labourers on which the present paper is based. We are hearing the news about migrant labourers dying of hunger, fatigue and road accidents as they started their long journeys of more than thousands miles from various cities across the India back to their villages. This draws our attention towards the problem of migrant labourers. This paper examines this issue through a sociological lens. The research consisted of an in-depth text analysis of the relevant documents available at the internet sites, literary books, magazines and newspapers. Suitable examples have been also quoted in support of findings.

A **pandemic** is an epidemic that affects a very wide geographical area (like multiple countries or continents) while **epidemic** is a disease that affects a large number of people within a community, population, or region. The most infamous pandemic was “Spanish Flu” which affected large parts of the world population and is thought to have killed at least 40 million people in 1918-1919. Two other influenza pandemics occurred in 1957 (“Asian influenza”) and 1968 (“Hong Kong influenza”) and caused significant morbidity and mortality globally (*Indian Society by NCERT: 18*). More recently we are facing the threat of COVID-19.

COVID-19 is caused by a virus (Corona virus) that attacks mainly the respiratory tract like nose, throat and also the lungs and spreads from person to person in droplets from coughing or sneezing of a COVID-19 infected person. Touching any infected surfaces or clothes and then touching one’s mouth, nose or eyes can transmit the disease. First, pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, China was first reported to the World Health Organization (WHO) Country office in China on 31 December 2019. The outbreak was declared a public health emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. On 11 February 2020, WHO announced a name for the new corona virus disease as COVID-19 (www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/events-as-they-happen).

Migration from one area to another in search of improved livelihoods is a key feature of human history (*Srivastava and Sasikumar, 2003*). These moves might be of short to long distance as well as of short to long duration (*Kosinski and Prothero, 1975; Massey, 1990*). The term migration refers to the movement of organisms like human, animals and birds from one place to the other. Migration thus means a change of residence. **Migrant labourers** are those persons who leave their native places or villages, come to urban areas and take up jobs or labour works and starts living there but having no intention to stay permanently in the urban areas in which they work.

2. Impact of Pandemic on Migrant Labourers

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on migrant labourers has region-wise significant variation. Once again the present scenario has shown us the real face of rural-urban divide and brings attention to socio-economic inequalities related to the poorest and vulnerable. With nationwide lockdown and closing in India many migrant labourers have dislocated due to having no daily wages or jobs and money. They are unable to afford even their basic needs i.e. food, clothing and shelter. They are unable to pay rent to their landlords. They are unable to send money to their families back home. They are truly stranded. Thus, thousands of migrant labourers took decision to walk hundreds of miles to reach their native villages as public transportation has been shut down in India to avoid the spread of COVID-19. They are suffering from starvation

and feeling stressed and uncertain. Certainly the poor are more vulnerable due to low levels of nutrition and poor physical health.

We heard the news of sixteen people were killed when they were run over by a freight train near Maharashtra's Aurangabad as they slept on train tracks after a long journey on foot in a desperate attempt to go back to their home towns hundreds of kilometers away in Madhya Pradesh (*Hindustan Times*, 2020). Six migrant workers, who were walking to their homes in Bihar from Punjab, were killed and five others seriously injured when a speeding bus ran over them on the Delhi- Saharanpur highway in Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh (*The Wire*, 2020). The almost unimaginable burden of personal grief is falling on families whose sole or major bread-winner stopped working or died on the way home.

Once, Stalin said that to have 20,000 die is a statistic but to have one person die is a tragedy (*John S. Oxford: 2003*).

Among the various categories of migrant labourers in India, one category is of the seasonal workers employed in agriculture and related activities. With their mobility restricted this very section faces one of the greatest brunt of the pandemic lockdown. Under such conditions, the present agricultural season is even more crucial for the rural workers to fight their daily battles of hunger and destitution. In the northern states of Punjab and Haryana it is a busy season of wheat harvesting, which employs big numbers of migrant labourers from the eastern states of Bihar and Jharkhand. In the wake of this pandemic on the one hand there has been a shortage of labour in these northern states to carry out harvest and post harvest operations, while on the other hand in the states from where the workers could not migrate the agricultural wages have fallen due to oversupply of labour. The migrant workers in their home states have also been adversely affected by the absence of all non farm work during this period of lockdown. Resulting labour shortage will have an impact on food availability and market prices globally (<https://focusweb.org/migrant-agricultural-workers-in-india-and-the-covid-19-lockdown/>).

3. Social Perspectives on Pandemic and Migrant Labourers

The sociological analysis of pandemic and migrant labourers needs to be study. This study will add to the stock of sociological knowledge of migrants.

First, we looked the matter with the lens of 'Sociological Imagination'. As **C. Wright Mills** (1959), a well-known American sociologist has written, sociology can help you to map the links and connections between "personal troubles" and "social issues". By personal troubles Mills means the kinds of individual worries, problems or concerns that everyone has. A social issue, on the other hand, is about large groups and not about the individuals who make them up (*Indian Society by NCERT: 03*). For example, many individuals experience one or more social problems like poverty or unemployment. When we hear about these individuals, it is easy to think that their problems are theirs alone, and that they and other individuals with the same problems are entirely to blame for their difficulties. Sociology takes a different approach, as it stresses that individual problems are often rooted in problems stemming from aspects of society itself (<https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/a-primer-on-social-problems/s04-02-sociological-perspectives-on-s.html>).

To illustrate Mills's viewpoint, let's use our sociological imaginations to understand this contemporary social problem of migrant labourers due to COVID-19. If only a few migrant labourers were going back to their home by walking, we could say reasonably explain their decision of walking by saying they were lacked good work and savings habits, they were impatient, and so forth. If so, their difficulties on the way home would be their own personal trouble. But when hundred thousands of migrant labourers are walking to reach their native villages and facing so many difficulties, this is best to understand as a social issue because, as Mills (1959:9) put it, "the very structure of opportunities has collapsed. Both the correct statement of the problem and the range of possible solutions require us to consider the economic and political institutions of the society, and not merely the personal situation and character of a scatter of individuals."

A blaming-the-victim approach points to solutions to social problems such as pandemic and migrant labourers that are very different from those suggested by a more structural approach that blames the system. If we blame the victim (migrant labourers), we would spend our limited time to address the personal failings of individuals who suffer from poverty, illiteracy, poor health, eating disorders, and other difficulties. If instead we blame the system, we would focus our attention on the various social conditions (unequal socio-economic structure, discriminative system, government's decisions and the like) that account for these difficulties. A sociological understanding suggests that the latter approach is ultimately needed to help us deal successfully with the social problems we are facing today (<https://2012books.lardbucket.org/books/a-primer-on-social-problems/s04-02-sociological-perspectives-on-s.html>).

Karl Marx (1867), a well-known German communist and sociologist has introduced the concept of class consciousness. Class consciousness refers to the awareness by a social or economic class of their position and interests within the structure of the economic order and social system in which they live. In contrast, false consciousness is a perception of one's relationships to social and economic systems of an individual nature, and a failure to see oneself as a part of a class with particular class interests relative to the economic order and social system (<https://www.thoughtco.com/class-consciousness-3026135>).

According to Marxist theory, class consciousness is an awareness of one's social and/or economic class relative to others, as well as an understanding of the economic rank of the class to which you belong in the context of the larger society. In addition, class consciousness involves an understanding of the defining social and economic characteristics and collective interests of your own class within the constructs of the given socio-economic and political order (*Ibid*).

Class consciousness is a core facet of Marx's theory of class conflict, which focuses on the social, economic, and political relationships between workers and owners within a capitalist economy. The precept was developed in conjunction with his theory on how workers might overthrow the system of capitalism and then go on to create a new economic, social, and political system based on equality rather than inequality and exploitation (*Ibid*).

To illustrate Marx's viewpoint, let's use Marxist approach to understand this contemporary social problem of migrant labourers due to COVID-19. Classless society can be possible only by class revolution therefore we need class consciousness. Migrant labourers become conscious of sharing common grievances against the exploitive system, born out

of collective struggle which they are going through nowadays. The system only functions as long as the workers did not recognize their unity as a class of labourers, their shared economic and political interests (which are conflicting interests of owners), and the power inherent in their numbers. Marx argued that when workers came to understand the totality of these factors, they would achieve class consciousness, and this, in turn, would lead to a workers' revolution that would overthrow the exploitative socio-economic system.

Marx and Engels define state in the book "The Communist Manifesto (1848)", "the executive of the modern state is but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie". They further said that the state is the "political power, properly so called, is merely the organized power of one class for oppressing another". This seems to be true in case of migrant labourers who are suffering due to unplanned and sudden lockdown. Recently we have seen political drama between two political parties over buses for migrant labourers in Uttar Pradesh. Both the parties blamed each other for not understanding their responsibilities. But no one could rise above politics for helping migrant labourers. Where a Bollywood actor, Sonu Sood has been organizing buses and helping many stranded migrant labourers reach their homes during the novel corona-virus lockdown. According to *The Hindu*, he has helped approximately 12,000 migrants reach home, and arrangements have been made for another 45,000.

Then, it is beyond our understanding why our governments (central, state and local self governance), MPs and MLAs couldn't do such efforts for migrant labourers. Why it took so long for starting trains for migrant labourers reach their homes. We are also hearing the news about inordinate delays, unhygienic conditions on board, served rotten food, or no food or water at all. Is really the state a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie?

We need **subaltern studies** on the issues of migrant labourers during lockdown due to COVID-19. These studies' main goal is to retake history for the under-classes, for the voices that had not been heard previous. Migrant labourers are subalterns in terms of class, caste, gender, language and culture. We should learn the lessons from the Spanish influenza pandemic of 1918-19 which well recalled in collective memories, is less well recorded by historians. No way reduces the historical significance of this disease and its impact.

In 1918, Spain was unjustly blamed for the terrifying outbreak of influenza and the title of "Spanish Lady" was widely attached to the disease. The literature on the flu pandemic is strangely silent as to why the gender-specific term "Lady" was so widely used to describe the outbreak (*Phillips and Killingray: 2003*). This shouldn't be done in the case of corona-virus. Whenever we write on the outbreak of COVID-19, we should well record the problems of migrant labourers with reference to India.

4. Challenges for Migrant Labourers and Government of India

There are following challenges and uncertainties for migrant labourers like: - how the communities they come from originally will receive them as they are moving from cities to villages, they are held in fear, that they might be carrying the virus? How they are going to deal with this social conflict? Now, what they are going to do to earn bread or survival? Are they returning to sit idle? Can they afford health care facilities or hygiene? Is this practically possible for them to maintain social/safe distancing? What will be their quality of life? Can they forget this worst experience of their lives to escape psychological stress?

The following are challenges and uncertainties for the Indian government such as: What is the government going to do for the migrant workers who are returning home in the scorching heat? How will the government resolve the complaints of migrant laborers on board the train but facing problems of food, water and sanitation? Migrants are often subject to discrimination, even in normal circumstances. With the current fear of contagion, communities are not very welcoming of migrants. Under the present circumstances, the likelihood that recruitment of new migrant labourers would be impacted and discrimination against them would increase very high, so what are the plans of Indian government for such issues to stop discrimination and social tensions? If migrant workers do not have bank accounts, how can they benefit from the packages announced by the Government of India? How is India going to be a self reliance society in the era of globalization? How is Indian government going to maintain equity, justice and dignity of lives for its agenda of sustainable development during lockdown? How is government going to improve education system so that the poorest students (especially belong to families of migrant labourers) can also take benefit of it during lockdown?

5. Conclusion

Nowadays, we are facing the most difficult times of our lives. With closing and lockdown, the whole world is on a halt. Many of us are feeling frightened, unsettled and unsure due to COVID-19. This global pandemic has not yet ended. It has not only affected our health but also has made us worried about our carrier/job/business, finances and personal life. Migrant labourers and the poorest people are facing the challenge of survival. Governments need to fully take into account the seriousness of the current scenario to be managed and to give more attention to uncertainties. We need to improve our health care system. Migrant workers need cash aid so they can buy essentials for life, only providing food would not be enough. They can also be provided with seed money to start-ups. People have to be helped to use online channels for cash transactions. Our government needs to develop a system to access the accurate data record of migrant workers in India. The future of humanity will depend on how we are going to share our limited resources on the basis of equality and justice among our citizens as, our Vedic prayer '*Sarve bhavantu sukhinaha, Sarve santu niramayaha*', i.e., (may everybody in this universe) be happy and healthy, highlights the global and multidimensional nature of development.

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