ASIA 26.06.2020 | Sanjay Kapoor

Workers' rights in India are under attack

In India, migrant workers face poverty and an uncertain future, as so-called 'labour reforms' undo many hard-earned rights

In Delhi as in other Indian cities, well-dressed men and women are standing outside neighborhood grocery and departmental stores begging for money or just be helped to purchase food items for their hungry families. 'We never thought we would have to beg for food', said one such person.

These are some of the millions who have lost their jobs in the gig economy or those who stayed back without employment in the big cities after Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi declared a claustrophobic lockdown on 24 March to suppress the spread of coronavirus.

The decision of India's nationalist leader to shut down the country to fight the virus not just broke the back of a flailing economy and a struggling working class, but also unleashed forces that could undo many of the gains the country has achieved in recent years.

Small town India doesn't provide a future

After the lockdown, millions of unemployed and people without shelter, braving oppressive heat and police violence, embarked on their long journey to their distant homes. Hundreds died in this difficult voyage and millions got brutalised by the heat and insensitivity of the state, until the government agreed to transport them in trains and buses.

Six million alone traveled by 4,450 migrant worker trains. Another 1.5 million traveled by buses. Many migrants are still living in the urban centres, hoping that their fortunes will improve when their work places get revived. They are part of the 30 per cent of the urban population (139 million in total) that would run out of all their savings by the end of June

2020 if they do not get help or get re-employed.

The migrant population contributes about 2 per cent of the GDP through remittances and 8 per cent through their labour.

Compared to those stuck in the cities, villages provide better emotional and social protection, which was the reason why these workers were desperate to return home. Most of these migrants are registered at their village address where they get state-mandated doles. It was, hence, not uncommon to hear many migrants asserting that they would never return to the cities that had given them such a cruel deal. The harsh truth is however that villages may give them food, but the circumstances that drove them in search of jobs to the big cities have not really changed. There are still no jobs in the villages or in small town India.

What will the migrants do?

The bulk of the interstate male migrant population originates from 54 districts of the country with a majority of them located in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar. These states are mired in extreme poverty and provide little opportunities for young men except to work as farm labour. The young educated just hang around doing nothing. Aggressive casteism that prevents social mobility compels many of them to look for merit-based jobs in big cities, which are getting scarce due to the slowdown.

The cities are not ready to receive them yet. An Indian rail official said that most of the Special Express trains, which are returning to the cities after dropping off the migrants, are running empty – as the workers have not yet not started their journey back to take up their old jobs – if they still exist that is.

Migration experts believe that they will stay at home for the next few months for multiple reasons. Firstly, as most of these migrants are farmers, they will busy themselves in the sowing season. Secondly, despite their difficult economic circumstances they will not board the train until the scourge of the pandemic ends and they feel safe in the cities like Mumbai and Delhi, which have been ravaged by the coronavirus. Lastly, they will come only when they gather from their employers that they have a job waiting for them.

So despite serious adjustment problems for returning migrants in their village homes, they will stay there until the Television channels or messaging platforms like WhatsApp give them the news that puts their

enormous fears to rest.

An abysmal growth rate

The migrant population contributes about 2 per cent of the GDP through remittances and 8 per cent through their labour. Together the value they add to the economy is quite substantial. Their contribution to the GDP is more substantial than that of the Indian diaspora located in the Gulf and elsewhere.

Many of the migrants work in 67 million non-rural small and medium enterprises (SMEs) in India, the highest total number in the world. A 2019 report says that these SMEs employ 110 million people. Many were tottering for survival for the past few years after the Indian government demonetised high value currency notes, which were 85 per cent in circulation, and imposed Goods and Services Tax (GST) on an ill-prepared nation.

Both these moves struck a blow to this unregulated sector triggering a slowdown, which deepened the implications of the detrimental impact of lockdown on the economy. Before the country of 1.3 billion was shut down, rating agency Fitch was projecting an abysmal growth rate of 2 per cent in 2020-21. More rating agencies have further downsized their projections for the economy since then.

Though they have suffered great hardships, the urban migrants could exercise freedom of will if they are not desperate for work.

The government has been accused of meddling with numbers, but after the lockdown and the manner in which different sectors are performing, economists are claiming that the GDP growth might shrink by 9 or 10 per cent. For a country that successfully lifted millions of its poor people above the poverty line between 2004-14 through successful rural employment guarantee schemes and loan waivers, slowdown in economic growth can be a calamity.

There is evidence that a large number of people are sliding back into poverty. Women employment is showing a secular decline and now men, too, after lockdown, would find it difficult to get any work. Media interviews have shown many highly educated young men including former teachers with PhDs plowing land to make ends meet.

Worsening working conditions

The Chief Minister of the state of Uttar Pradesh, which sends the highest number of migrants, has shown resolve to control the virus and find jobs for the returnees – even if there is a mismatch between the work and their qualification. Expectedly there is an uptick in demand for rural jobs that involve digging holes, fixing village ponds or planting trees have increased. He has also passed a fatwa that no migrant from his state will travel until the state grants permission.

Stealthily, 'labour reforms' have been brought in that could undo many hard-earned rights achieved over many years. Shifts have been increased from 8 to 12 hours. Many welfare schemes have been withdrawn that discourage women from picking up a job. Safety standards have been lowered. These changes in labour laws also allow a lower threshold for firing workers. But it's not just Uttar Pradesh; eleven other state governments could implement these changes in the name of reviving the economy and attracting companies leaving China.

For three years, these enterprises have been exempted from visits by labour inspectors to oversee work environment and to ascertain there was no exploitation. 'It will be a return to slavery', claimed a communist party leader, Vijoo Krishnan. Some state governments like Karnataka tried to prevent these migrants from returning home, as realtors wanted them to work on their projects. Courts intervened on behalf of the hungry and harassed migrants to allow them to board the train home.

Though they have suffered great hardships, the urban migrants could exercise freedom of will if they are not desperate for work. Like it happened after the Spanish Flu of 1918, workers may not just see a spurt in demand for their labour, but also an opportunity to access improved conditions. They may go to states that give them better pay and working conditions like the left-ruled Southern State of Kerala. There are expectations of a demographic shift and depopulation from traditional centers like Mumbai and Kolkata to those areas that fit the needs of the working class. It will be a new, though, hesitant India that will emerge from the womb of the old.



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