

Sufferings of Migrant Labourers in India in the Covid-19 lockdown

R Venkat Reddy
Social activist
April 2020

Now, as the problem of migrant workers has been on rise in the aftermath of lockdown, ruling classes have started using a little (apple) polished word to describe this section as *guest workers*. Obviously, they are not guest workers but the only workers who are further enriching the urban Rich and responsible for 50% of India's GDP. As per an estimate there are 44 crore (44,00,00,000) workers who are labouring in the unorganised sections like construction sites, brick kilns, agriculture operations, restaurants, home maids, baby sitters etc. Small and marginal farmers whose lives have become difficult as the crisis situations prevailed in the agriculture are also included in this. It is these 44 crore citizens responsible for 50% of wealth generation in the country.



The lockdown imposed by the government on March 24, has severely affected the lives of all these 44-crore people. The worst affected of them are urban migrant labourers. Heart breaking scenes unveiled in all the metros in the entire country, whether it is New Delhi or Mumbai, Hyderabad or Bengaluru. Everywhere it is the same situation – migrant workers, unsure of their future decided to reach their homes, walking



hundreds of kilometres – some 100, some 500 and or more under the burning sun. Whether it is young or old, men or women, pregnant women or lactating women millions of people were seen marching the length and breadth of the country. All this has happened for several days as they were deprived of even a single square meal a day. In the immediate past that preceded the announcement of lockdown, thousands of workers have returned

to the southern cities where they were working after spending a few days with their families on the occasion of the Holi festival (a festival of colours-celebrated on large scale). They have come back to work after spending or giving away all their savings at home. Some of them were not paid they were due to get for their work in the month of February.

The kind of migration that the country has been witnessing currently seems to be much severer than the displacement that took place in 1947 when India was granted Independence and was bifurcated. Mind you, the displacement in 1947 has been the worst displacement that the world never heard till now.



When some activists spoke to them in an obvious bid to stop them, it was clear that they lost trust in the system. They didn't get any kind of support from the government, their employers or fellow citizens. They felt betrayed and are convinced that there is nobody to understand their sufferings or offer them a square meal. They are forced into such a situation that they cannot survive or survival is not possible in the urban points which were grown by them, built by them, developed by them. With meagre amounts on their hands they started marching towards their native places with a hope that the village they were brought up in, will definitely provide the much-needed solace, a little bread and share their worries and emotions. It



is not certain that every member in the group will be alive until they reach home. There are no eateries open along the path. Even if they are there, they do not have enough money to purchase. They didn't care for the ailments they are suffering from. Still they resorted to this adventure.

The Chief Minister of Telangana addressing media said that his government considers all the migrant workers who have come from different parts of the country as partners in the regeneration of Telangana. So, he promised that the government will duly respect them and provide all sorts of support for their stay. Government of India, on its part announced a relief to the tune of Rs. 1.75 lakh crores (175,000 * 100,00,000) to them. But to obtain they need lot of documentary support to authenticate each one. So, they could not avail of this opportunity.



The situation has become worse when Lockdown 2.0 was

announced on April 14. It has created panic among the people who were still having some hopes on the government that it would come to their rescue. As the Prime Minister announced extension of lockdown up to May 3 and possibly beyond also, there was a kind complete fear gripped the people who stayed back. As a result, there were again movements started.

All this shows that the government has not done the required home work before imposing lockdown way back in the month of March. The question of migrant workers, it is crystal clear that, was not even thought of by anybody in such a large machinery called government. There are two important Acts that deserve a mention here. While the Interstate Migrant Workers (regulation and working conditions) Act – 1979 calls for maintenance of the details of every immigrant worker locally by the concerned officer at district level and block level, there is no evidence that at least in one block such a register is maintained. Implementation of The Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act – 2008 is also far below the level of satisfaction. Had either of these laws is implemented in letter and spirit this kind of situation would not have arisen.

As of today, it is widely believed that no public transport would be available in the couple of months to come. An indication to this effect is that Government of India suggesting the State Governments to draw plans to repatriate the migrant workers in their States in coordination with each other, so that the problem can be solved. Though it is already late, it should be appreciated that at least in this late hour the government started thinking about the wealth makers. We should be thankful to the government of India for this.



In the background of agriculture sector landing in deep crisis, distress migration has been on the rise. As development in recent times (for the last three decades) is concentrated around urban places, distressed outmigration is increasing in the same pace.

Now, there is no guarantee that the conditions that were prevailing in the country during pre-Corona period especially with the case of migrant workers will come back as easily as it was earlier. Lost trust cannot be built up again easily. It may take several months, perhaps years also. Considering all these facts and as a citizen of this country I suggest the following:

- As it is established that the governments cannot solve the problems of migrant workers during lockdown, draw fool proof plans that will help every migrant worker reaches her/his places hassle free
- Implement the 1979 and 2008 Acts impeccably and amend them in tune to the present conditions
- Formulate policies to revive agriculture