

Social Distancing Between the State and the Migrant in India: A Citizenship Perspective

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Introduction

On 25 March 2020, India's prime minister, Narendra Modi, imposed the world's severest lockdown in a bid to stem the threat of Covid-19.¹ The stringent lockdown triggered a mass exodus from cities across India, with panic-stricken migrant workers desperately trying to get back to their homes in villages. The most conservative estimates suggest 30 million internal migrants in India. More realistic estimates peg the numbers at 100 million. If even half the most conservative figures were trekking back home, we are likely to have been witness to the forced migration of at least 15 million people criss-crossing the country to get back home. These numbers most likely dwarf the migrations wrought by the subcontinent's blood-soaked 1947 Partition, estimated between 10 and 12 million people.

As in many countries, Covid-19 exposed the fault lines searing through state and society in India. India's lockdown exposed the disjunctions between mobility and citizenship in India, revealing the immobile foundations of the former, the fragmented trajectory of the latter and the social distance of migrant workers from the state. Drawing on ethnographic research undertaken with labour migrants in rural north Bihar, we illustrate these disjunctions between mobility and citizenship, with particular attention to the restoration of class and caste hierarchies wrought by the pandemic. A citizenship perspective allows us to recognise the slide from precarious improvements in migrant labourers' lives to their reinsertion into societal hierarchies.

Migrants as Fragmented Citizens: Insiders but Exterior

State formation has historically entailed mobility and migration so that they could be populated by the 'right' sort of people, with the 'wrong' ones excluded. States have remained suspicious

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of mobile populations, including within their borders.² The result has been the social and political exclusion of migrants. India's lockdown has rendered their situation even more precarious (Centre for Equity Studies 2020). Social and political exclusion of migrant workers in India is endemic (Roy 2018), fragmenting the foundational rights that constitute citizenship. These foundational rights exceed the de jure civil-juridical rights that outline the relationship between individuals and the nation-states that confer 'citizen' status on them. Rather, as the political philosopher Hannah Arendt (1951) would have it in her modern classic, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, the foundational rights to which citizenship pertains are to do with the right to recognition, inclusion and membership in the society. Citizenship thus refers to, in Arendtian terms, the 'right to have rights'.

Drawing on these insights, sociologist Margaret Somers in *Genealogies of Citizenship: Markets, Statelessness and the Right to have Rights* (2008) has helpfully distinguished the formal rights attached to the legal status of citizen from the right to human personhood, which entails the recognition of people as moral equals endowed by full inclusion in the social and political community. Accordingly, she observes, citizenship studies typically intimate a two-sided field: one refers to the geopolitical borders of exclusion that distinguish 'insiders' from 'outsiders'; and the other fleshes the differential practices of membership within those designated as 'insiders', privileging some 'insiders' as 'interior' while others are 'exterior'.

Covid-19 has demonstrated the ways in which circular labour migrants in India are 'insiders' but 'exterior' to the inside. They are 'insiders' in that they can claim to be Indians in a way that other nationalities cannot (although the recent attempts to amend citizenship laws in India open a whole can of worms). But they are 'exterior' to the insider dimension of citizenship. As 'insiders', they possess the formal rights available in theory to any Indian citizen, such as the right to vote, the right to own property, and other social and economic rights guaranteed by the Constitution. In that respect, they are arguably more privileged than 'outsiders' who might be labelled 'illegal immigrants' and face arrests, internment and deportation. However, they remain 'exterior' to the insider dimension of Indian citizenship because of the social and political exclusion to which they are subjected. Their formal privileges are undermined by the myriad ways in which the Indian state and fellow citizens oppress, exploit and marginalise them. Circular migrants who criss-cross state borders face rather peculiar exclusions. While 'insiders' for the Indian state, they are 'outsiders' for the destination state and 'exterior' to the state of origin. The lockdown revealed in poignant ways the overlapping 'outsider' and 'exterior' status of circular labour migrants.

Migration without Mobility

A vast majority of the migrant workers desperately trying to return home are in informal employment in their destination states, thus being both 'outsiders' for these states and 'exterior'. While workers in general face wage repressions, with migrant workers being

especially precarious, the vulnerabilities of circular labour migrants are particularly acute (de Haan, 2002; de Haan, 1994; Keshri and Bhagat 2012; Chandrasekhar, Das and Sharma 2015; Agrawal and Chandrasekhar 2015; Tumble, 2015). Analysing official survey data, demographers Kunal Keshri and Ram Bilas Bhagat (2013) demonstrate that the proportion of circular labour migrants tend to concentrate among lower monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) quintiles, while the proportion of longer-term migrants increases as one moves up the MPCE quintile hierarchy.

The severe vulnerabilities faced by circular labour migrants are well established (Connell et al. 1976; Breman 1996; Oberai and Singh 1983; Bannerjee 1986; de Haan and Rogaly 2002; Rogaly et al. 2002; Deshingkar and Farrington 2009; Deshingkar and Akter, 2009; Mosse et al. 2002). Analysis of official data testifies to the vulnerabilities suffered by circular labour migrants (Srivastava 2011; Mishra 2016). The *Report of the Working Group on Migration (RWGM)*, commissioned by the Government of India, offers further insights into these vulnerabilities (Government of India, 2017). Table 1 below reproduces data presented in the *RWGM* on the occupational structure of circular labour migrants. The table illustrates that a large proportion of migrant workers find employment in India’s burgeoning construction industry and ancillary industries such as brick kilns, both notorious for their precarious labour conditions. Circular labour migrants of rural origin work in the primary sector, especially agriculture, while migrants of urban origin work in the manufacturing sector.

Table 1: Occupational structure of short-term migrants in India, 2011

<i>Sector</i>	<i>Rural origin</i>	<i>Urban origin</i>
Primary	24.9	13.2
Manufacturing	16.8	26
Construction	41.6	25.2
Services	13	23
Others	3.7	12.6

Source: Government of India, 2017.

The vulnerabilities to which circular labour migrants are subjected vary across sectors. The highly fragmented nature of India’s construction industry contributes to the vulnerabilities of circular labour migrants. Around 96 per cent of all construction companies are classified as small and medium enterprises. Srivastava and Sutradhar (2016) demonstrate in their study of the construction industry based in the National Capital Region (NCR) that nearly all workers hired by the construction units were migrant workers. As many as 94 per cent of their interview respondents have no formal labour contracts. Nearly 60 per cent report working for 11 to 12 hours a day. Almost half of all workers reported working for all seven days during the week, while 43.2 per cent reported a six-day week. Over a quarter of all workers reported working all 30 days in the month. The majority of labour migrants live in

fenced-in and guarded worksites, with conditions similar to those of labour camps. Many of them live under tarpaulin roofs with poor amenities. They work through the day and by night, with little by way of ‘overtime payments’.

The growing informalisation of India’s manufacturing sector further exacerbates the vulnerabilities of circular labour migrants. Not only is Indian manufacturing witnessing a growing number of informal units but also a growing contractualisation of employment in formal units. The National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector reports a dip in the total number of workers on formal contracts (NCEUS 2008, 4). Migrant workers tend to be paid lower than their local counterparts. Employers regularly flout statutory minimum wage stipulations. They also prefer to pay piece rates. Payments are often irregular and sometimes not made in time.

Furthermore, circular labour migrants tend to be disproportionately drawn from such historically marginalised communities as Dalits and Adivasis, officially classified as Scheduled Tribes (STs) and Scheduled Castes (SCs), respectively. Table 2 reproduces the data first computed by Srivastava (2011) to present the comparative profile of circular labour migrants by different communities, contrasted with long-term migrants.

Table 2: Community profile of circular labour migrants and longer-term migrants

<i>Community</i>	<i>Population share</i>	<i>Circular labour migrants</i>			<i>Long-term migrants</i>		
		<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Rural</i>	<i>Urban</i>	<i>Total</i>
Scheduled Tribe	8	20.1	3.5	18.6	6.8	2.2	6
Scheduled Caste	16	23.7	17.5	23.1	19.2	11.8	17.9
Other Backward Class	52	39.5	43.6	39.9	44.5	37.9	43.3
Others	24	16.7	35.4	18.4	29.5	48	32.8

Source: Srivastava 2011.

Migration as Hope and Despair

Much has been written about the spurt in internal migration within India since the 1990s. Scholars have directed attention to heightening hopes generated by the crumbling of caste hierarchies and exacerbated desperation spawned by structural changes in the agrarian economy. A pertinent account of migration from a village in north Bihar, which we may call Sargana, may be gleaned from an interview undertaken by one of us (Ajmal) with Himmat Mehta who has been working in Punjab since 1975. An excerpt from that interview is reproduced below.

I was about 22 [in 1975] and happily cultivating my tiny plot of land. I had just got married, and we had had a child. I was content with life. Then, one day, a Musahar called Buchan Talwa – he must have been about 16 or 17 years of age – drove a buffalo into my plot. Everything was ruined. I lost all my season's earnings. Naturally, I was upset. I thrashed the fellow soundly. He confessed that he did what he did at the behest of [Rajput landlord in a neighbouring village]. That man [the landlord] and I had a long-standing dispute. He hated me and others from my community. How could 'Backwards' like us do well?

Whatever it was, I was devastated and took out all my anger on that moronic Musahar. I thrashed him black and blue...

Three years later [1978], suddenly, I have a visitor – a young man wearing bright new clothes out of the blue. A well-ironed shirt, neat pleated trousers, a pair of goggles. The fellow comes and touches my feet, greets me with respect. I am surprised. He looks familiar. I ask him to sit down near me. But he tells me he is in a hurry. He only came to thank me, he says. I am nonplussed. "Thank me for what? Who are you?" I ask.

[Himmat's eyes widen with excitement] Turns out the man was none other than Buchan Talwa. I asked him why he was thanking me when I had thrashed him so badly. Buchan tells me that was exactly why he had come. [The conversation turns more animated, with Himmat waving his hands about] You see, after that encounter, he was fed up with life in the village. He was dependent on the landlord, so he had to do the landlord's bidding. If he did, he would get thrashed – like he did when he attacked me. If he didn't, he was as good as dead. So, he ran away.

"Where did you go," I ask him.

"Punjab," he replies.

"Punjab?" I ask. "What did you do in Punjab?" I wonder.

"Worked as a farm labourer," he answers.

"Farm labour?" I ask incredulously. He bought all those fancy clothes and accessories by being a farm labourer? I found it hard to believe.

Buchan Talwa told me that I should go to work in Punjab as well. He had heard about my difficulties after he destroyed my crop. I had to sell that plot. Although I bought another one, this one was much smaller, so I had to supplement my farm income with agricultural labour. Both my wife and I worked on [a Kayasth landlord]'s farm. The fellow was extremely stingy. Buchan told me that if I had to work on someone else's farm, I might as well work in Punjab. Life was better in Punjab. People treated one another with respect, he told me. They offered each other ijat.

I liked the idea. He told me that he would take me. I said, "Great." Some fourteen of us went with him the next season. Some of us were Nais, others were Yadavs. And there were one or two Harijans as well. And here we were, trusting our lives with a Musahar whom we didn't even know. But it was great that he took us to Punjab. We loved it there. (Ajmal, interview notes ZA.I.09.2017-01-17: Himmat Mehta, 17 January 2017)

The interview with Mehta distils for us the several factors that accelerated migration from Sargana. These are briefly outlined below.

Social conflict

The social conflicts that ravaged Sargana and similar villages across Bihar are unmistakable from Mehta's account. Three axes of conflict stand out in particular: 'high-caste' landlords against 'low-caste' peasants; 'low-caste' peasants against 'untouchable' labourers; and 'high-caste' landlords against 'untouchable' labourers. The 'high-caste' landlords resented the improving economic condition of 'low-caste' peasants facilitated by the abolition of landlordism carried out by the postcolonial state in Bihar after Independence. Although the very modest economic gains made by these peasants were precarious at best, Bihar's landlords detested those gains which, they correctly perceived, chipped away at their own privileges. They successfully deployed such 'untouchable' labourers as Buchan Talwa, who were still dependent on them for work and wages, to undermine the 'low-caste' peasants' emerging economic improvements. While resistance to such demands was not uncommon, as accounts of armed left-wing movements of agricultural labourers in the state illustrate (Kunnath 2012; Wilson 1999; Chitralkha 2010), most agricultural labourers found themselves with few options but to comply with landlord demands. Outright refusal to comply with these demands often meant ostracism, destitution and even death. Relations between 'low-caste' peasants and 'untouchable' labourers remained fraught at best: the shared experience of subordination to a common landlord could not subsume contradictions arising due to hierarchies of caste status, economic standing and labour relations. 'Low-caste' peasants such as Himmat Mehta typically hired 'untouchable' landless labours such as Buchan Talwa at even lower wages than the 'high-caste' landlord.

Caught between landlords' declining privilege who remained influential but not dominant and the growing clout of peasants who did not hesitate to assert their dominance even if they were not yet influential, labourers such as Buchan Talwa seem to have had limited options indeed. The option Buchan Talwa is reported to have chosen entailed fleeing the social conflict in which he was enmeshed. Such a course of action appears reasonable for millions of 'untouchable' landless labourers who may have found themselves engulfed in conflicts between a landed gentry with eroding fortunes and an emerging peasantry willing to assert its dominance in the countryside.

Structural changes

Nevertheless, the incipient economic gains of the emerging peasantry should not be exaggerated. As Himmat Mehta's account illustrates, they remain precarious and far from the imagined peasant household that allegedly meets its subsistence needs from their own plots of land. Mehta finds that he and his wife have to combine agricultural work on their own farm with hiring out their labour to other peasants and landlords in and around Sargana. Mehta and his wife face structural changes over which they have little or no control. India's Agricultural Census (2015, 27, Table 4.2) suggests that the average size of operational agricultural holdings has reduced from 2.28 hectares in 1970–71 to 1.15 hectares in 2010–11. Marginal holdings in India averaged 0.40 hectares in 1970–71: Bihar figures are likely to be much lower, which means that in 1975 a marginal peasant such as Mehta would be cultivating a tiny plot of land indeed. Furthermore, they would have little option but to supplement the income from their own agricultural operations by hiring out their labour on their wealthier neighbours' farms. A reduction in the average size of all plot sizes, including those of marginal plots of land especially between 1970–71 and 1976–79 (from 0.40 hectares to 0.39 hectares), certainly results in the deterioration of peasants' subsistence capacity and enhances their dependence on the goodwill of better-off farmers and landlords.

The fragmentation of landholdings in India accompanies the increased incidence of landlessness in the country. National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) data suggests that the proportion of landless households in India increased between 1971–72 and 1982 (from 9.6 per cent to 11.3 per cent), reflecting the growing precariousness of those engaged in agriculture. Indeed, that the contemporary landholding scenario is perhaps even more precarious is borne out by Rawal's (2008) analysis of the NSSO data and methodology, which suggests that as many as 40 per cent of rural Indian households are likely to be landless. Indeed, the Census of India suggests that the proportion of cultivators to the rural population is declining and that of agricultural labourers increasing since 2001. This points to the intensification of this trend over the last two decades. Mehta's family escaped landlessness but teetered on the verge of it. The distinction between his economic situation and that of the landless Buchan Talwa was thus a fine one indeed.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, marginal and small peasants such as Mehta found themselves enmeshed in the tenancy relations they had hoped to exit for decades. In 1970–71, 27 per cent of all marginal landholdings were tenants of some sort, an increase from 24 per cent in 1960–61. Likewise, almost 28 per cent of small landholdings became tenant holdings during the same period, up from 25 per cent. Thus, while on the one hand, ‘low-caste’ peasants such as Mehta certainly gained a modicum of economic security after the abolition of landlordism, on the other hand, they found themselves never too far from the quagmire of economic uncertainty. The increased vulnerability of peasants such as Himmat Mehta and labourers such as Buchan Talwa is borne out by official data on poverty.

While poverty rates, measured as a bundle of consumption items by a government-instituted committee led by the economist H. T. Lakdawala, dropped gradually from the 1950s, the pace of decline slowed down considerably during the 1980s. To illustrate, the poverty headcount declined from 46.6 per cent in 1982–83 to 38.7 per cent in 1987–88 but then ever so slightly from 38.7 per cent to 37 per cent between 1987–88 and 1993–94. In states such as Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Bihar, poverty headcounts actually increased during the latter period: Bihar registered an increase from less than 54 per cent to over 58 per cent and UP from 40.27 per cent to 42 per cent. Among Dalits such as Buchan Talwa, poverty headcounts increased from 76 per cent to 77 per cent in Bihar and from 57 per cent to 59 per cent in UP.

The quest for dignified lives

The social conflicts plaguing Bihar and the economic precariousness blighting its poorest people’s lives should not obfuscate the social hopes they harboured. A recurring theme from the fieldwork pertained to the vocabulary of ‘dignity’ to which migrant workers repeatedly turned in their discussions on life and labour. Throughout our fieldwork, references to *ijjat* have been galore. Accounts of labourers not giving *ijjat* to farmers, of people stigmatised as ‘low castes’ demanding to be treated with *ijjat* by self-styled ‘high castes’, of people wanting to lead lives with *ijjat* are strewn across my field notes.

The emergence of the vocabulary of *ijjat* is intimately linked with the political ascendance of Lalu Prasad Yadav as Bihar’s chief minister in March 1990. Yadav’s ascendance transformed the state’s political discourse, instilling a high degree of confidence among rural subaltern populations. A particularly popular slogan to be heard across Bihar was *Vikas nahin, samman chahiye*, which loosely translates into: “We want dignity, not development.” During fieldwork in rural north Bihar, at various times between 2010 and 2015, the common refrain was: “Lalu allowed us to raise our voice. He recognised our dignity” (see Roy 2013; Roy 2015; Roy 2016; Roy 2017; and Roy 2019). These accounts resonate with findings reported in Jha and Pushpendra (2012): “People recalled that once Lalu visited that village and went to OBC (Other Backward Classes) and SC hamlets. He told the gathering, ‘Migrate to any part of the country wherever you find work, earn money, and when you come back

dress well (*jeet-jat se raho*) and live with your head held high” (Jha and Pushpendra 2012, xx).

Precarious mobility

Such insights guard against an analysis that views migration as a mechanical reaction to ‘pull factors’ such as economic growth or ‘push factors’ such as destitution and poverty. Rather, they enable us to appreciate how the promise of mobility spurs migration but is rarely fulfilled. Dalits, Adivasis and others from communities stigmatised as ‘low caste’ or Muslim often migrate from rural areas to India’s burgeoning towns to escape caste and religious discrimination: as the anti-thesis of caste, mobility intimates promises of citizenship (Shah and Lerche, 2020). But the wages they expect to earn are neither enough nor assured for the entire family to travel together and settle in the city. Internal migration in India remains fundamentally immobile since it is a strategy of impoverished and precarious households diversifying their livelihood sources.

For many, migration thus offers a way to escape the indignity of caste-based hierarchies. However, even though circular labour migrants frequently travel great distances from their rural homes to cities to find work, it would be inaccurate to interpret their movements as any sort of upward social mobility. Nearly all of them migrate to provide a new income source for an impoverished family back home, a family whose support is vital for them to migrate at all. The incomes they find are not sufficient to bring this entire family with them, and as such, they are inextricably bound to the place from where they have come. They may travel back and forth, yet their families will never be able to leave the village or join them in the cities in most cases.

Rachit Yadav exemplifies the precarious mobility experienced by labour migrants in India. One of us (Anand) first met him during our ethnographic research in north Bihar’s Sargana village, late in July 2016, as he prepared to leave for Ludhiana. Rachit was employed as a chauffeur for a flour mill owner in Ludhiana and had been home for a few days. We met at his father’s small cycle repair shop. Over the course of the conversation, his father advised Rachit to ask his employer for a raise. At Rs 4,000 a month, Rachit’s income was well below the minimum wage. As it happened, Rachit did not only drive his employer’s car but also ran household errands and filled in for millworkers in their absence. Rachit would sometimes even undertake the back-breaking work of delivering sacks of flour to retail shops across Ludhiana.

During the conversation, Rachit reasoned that his cash earnings were so low because his employer provided him with accommodation and food. Rent for a room usually came to around Rs 1,500 in that particular area in Ludhiana. Most workers would share a room with one or more fellow workers. Workers at the flour mill usually spent around Rs 2,000 on food, and their monthly pay varied from Rs 8,000 to Rs 10,500. Over the course of this ethnographic

research, Anand had the chance to visit Rachit's accommodation, a spare hall on the top floor of his employer's residence. The amount his employer adjusted against this tiny accommodation was patently unfair. But Rachit was in no position to bargain. Moreover, he was unsure whether he would get a significant pay raise that would cover his food and accommodation if he left the accommodation at his employer's residence.

Rachit remitted almost all of his earnings back home. His family needed the money because they were trying to get some construction work done. As a consequence, Rachit had no savings. Despite his spatial mobility from Bihar to Punjab, he could see no prospects for social mobility. Eventually, Rachit was sacked by his employer for no apparent reason and returned to Sargana in June 2017. Rachit began ferrying passengers from Sargana to the nearest administrative towns and markets on a four-wheeler. His family was eventually able to construct their house, drawing on his income. Such investments allowed them to break out of their social subordination under caste-based hierarchies. The precarious livelihoods of migrant workers such as Rachit Yadav were ironically an improvement from their circumstances of a few decades and generations prior.

Even such precarious improvements in migrant workers' lives were devastated by the Modi government's lockdown.

Social Citizenship between State and Migrant

Prime Minister Modi's announcement gave Indians precisely four hours to prepare for the lockdown. With little reliable information available, migrant workers from rural settings – like everyone else – wanted to be with their families back in their homes during such a time of crisis. For many, there was little choice as employment opportunities in the towns shrivelled up, landlords threatened to evict them from their homes due to impending non-payment of rents, and markets shut down without them getting a chance to purchase essential food items necessary for their survival. As transport services shut down, they were compelled to undertake their journeys on foot, traversing many hundreds if not thousands of kilometres to get home.

The consequences were catastrophic. In conversations with one of us (Ajmal), Rajkumar Rajak, who had begun work in a garment factory in Jodhpur in February 2020 recounted his harrowing experience of being stranded when the city locked down. The factory in which he was employed shut operations barely a month after Rajkumar joined, leaving him with no work and little money. Although the factory owners promised him he would be paid his due Rs 14,000, he was in fact paid only Rs 8,000. He appealed to a previous employer for help and was provided food and accommodation through the months of April and May and a payment of Rs 4,000 for undertaking domestic work.

Rajkumar's ordeal in Jodhpur began to end when he registered for a Shramik train on 27 May and boarded the train for home on 2 June³. He reached Bhargama four days later, on 6 June. Although he was subjected to thermal screening as he left Jodhpur, passed through Patna and entered Araria, he was not asked to quarantine as he was asymptomatic.

Back in Sargana, however, Rajkumar's worse nightmares came true. He found the agrarian labour market saturated, with no prospect for work. "The farms are flush with labourers. All the women folk now work as farmhands. Where is any space for us?" he asks. For the first few weeks of his return, Rajkumar and his family drew on his wife's earnings from farm labour as well as his meagre savings from Jodhpur. Soon, as expected, his savings were exhausted. Although his wife continued to work as a farm labourer, her income was not enough to support the entire family. In desperation, Rajkumar approached a wealthy neighbour for a loan of Rs 5,000, even at 2 per cent per month interest rate. Although the terms of the loan are comparable to that offered by other lenders, the hierarchical relationship underpinned by the loan signals a restoration of the social order that appeared to be levelling out after the ascendance of Lalu Yadav. Rajkumar is of the Dhobhi community, oppressed as Dalit, and his wealthy neighbour is a Rajput. The class hierarchy underpinned by Rajkumar's loan is substantiated by a caste hierarchy that now appears to be resurrected. The pandemic and the State's associated indifference have pushed men and women such as Rajkumar Rajak right back into the folds of the caste hierarchy that they sought to escape by out-migrating from their villages.

Conclusion: Mobility, Citizenship, and Social Distancing from the State

Although the Indian economy is critically dependent on the country's millions of migrant labourers, the Indian State remains suspicious of its internal migrant workforce. In the best of times, the State seeks to politically and socially render them 'exterior' to the insider status of their Indian citizenship. The Covid crisis has only strengthened this tendency. By exposing the social bias of the Indian state, Covid-19 reveals the fragmented trajectory of citizenship among migrant workers in India. Mobility promises members of historically oppressed communities an escape from caste, but their precarious livelihoods disclose the immobile foundations of mobility (Roy 2020a). The sudden lockdown imposed on the country effectively expelled migrant workers from Indian cities, compelling them to undertake long journeys, often on foot, contrasted with their wealthier co-nationals who were flown back to India by the Indian state at public expense. Their social distance from the state fragments their membership of the political community in India (Roy 2020b).

As this chapter has shown, such fragmentation of membership has devastating consequences for labour migrants. Under 'normal' times, their condition tends towards precarity, as Rachit Yadav's case in this chapter has illustrated. Precarity entails that although labour migrants face bleak prospects of upward social mobility, they can at least hope to escape from caste-

based social hierarchies. Even as Rachit Yadav is sacked from his job in Ludhiana, his family is able to improve their living condition in Sargana. Similarly, Rajkumar Rajak can obtain employment in a garment factory. Although embedded in informal employment, he is not subjected to the caste hierarchies of the village. However, in the wake of Covid, such precarity translates into a restoration of social hierarchy. Men and women such as Rajkumar find themselves with no option but to enter into a debt relationship with a wealthy neighbour. The social distance from the state not only fragments their membership in the community but also reinserts them in a resurrected social hierarchy, thereby diluting their limited social and economic gains over the last three decades.

Notes

1. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/25/world/asia/india-lockdown-coronavirus.html>.
2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0000khg>.
3. Trains specially deployed by the Indian Government to transport migrant workers in various Indian States back to their homes. The first Shramik Train was deployed on May 1, 2020 and the services were run till July 24, 2020.

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