

## **Migrant Labourers' COVID-19 Lockdown Experience: Emerging Trajectory of Political Expression**

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### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 lockdown in India presents a scenario where state action sharply exposed the everyday structural realities<sup>1</sup> and vulnerabilities<sup>2</sup> of the country's migrant labourers to the public eye. The disproportionate impact of the lockdown on migrant labourers – struggling to sail through the storm of the pandemic after they were rendered jobless and left with nothing to survive on – stood against the dominant public narrative of 'we are in it together'.<sup>3</sup> Amidst the lockdown, migrant labourers were seen mainly either as victims or violators<sup>4</sup> in the popular narrative of the media. The paper goes beyond this narrative to throw light upon migrant labourers as a political subject by reflecting on their experience during the lockdown. The paper contributes to the scholarly debates on the vocabulary of political action employed by migrant workers by reflecting on their experience of the COVID-19 lockdown in cities. It draws from the narratives of migrant labourers, mostly from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and West Bengal, working as self-employed or on daily wages in cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Surat, Ahmedabad, Bengaluru, Hyderabad, etc. It uses quotes, worker testimonials, audio recordings, surveys, etc., which reflect on their experience of different phases of the lockdown.

First, I outline briefly the contradictions in the urban experience of migrant labourers in India's cities which form the basis of their struggles as labourers in the city and their encounters with the state and hence shape their political action and strategies. Laying this theoretical frame, I move on to the specifics of the 'crisis' of migrant labourers that followed amidst the state's hegemonic approach in combating the pandemic. Subsequently, the paper describes the narratives of the experiences of injustice shared by the migrant labourers during the lockdown using the various surveys, reports of distress calls and worker testimonials. Coupled with these narratives, the paper sheds light on the canvas of political expressions used by the migrant labourers in making sense of and responding to state action in different phases of the lockdown. The paper further provides a lens to read the political expressions emanating from their sense of injustice to understand the emergence of migrant workers as a political

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subject. In closing, the paper reiterates the response of migrant labourers to the injustice experienced during the lockdown and articulates the language of justice to govern the changing state-labour relations.

### **Struggling *in* the City, Struggling *for* the City**

Cities such as Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Ahmedabad, among others, have a history of migration and continue to serve as destinations for migrant labourers – as textile mill workers, jute mill workers etc. during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Chandavarkar 1981,1985) to work as street vendors, waste pickers, gig economy workers, rickshaw pullers, petty commodity producers, construction workers, etc.

Owing to neoliberal employment regimes, informalisation of labour (Lerche 2010; Chhachhi 2014) and hence the changing state–labour relations, the figure of the migrant worker came to be subsumed within or identified by categories such as the ‘working poor’, the ‘urban poor’, ‘informal labour’, etc. The state, through its policy and practices, plays a significant role in shaping the urban experience of migrant labourers working, living and navigating the city (Gooptu 2001, Williams et al. 2011); and in turn, their political attitudes and practices are shaped by their urban existence (Gidwani 2006). Their encounters further shape the urban experience of migrant labourers as migrants in the neo-liberal city (Samaddar 2018), visible in their socio-political exclusion (Roy 2020) in navigating their everyday lives through the city, for instance, in accessing public services (Jha and Kumar 2016); experiencing othering,<sup>5</sup> being the victims of native–outsider politics (Sinha 2013, Kumar and Jha 2018) etc. Even after 40 years of living in a city, a migrant remains an outsider and completely invisible yet indispensable for the city (Samaddar 2018), facing insecurity and vulnerability on an everyday basis (Jha and Kumar 2016).

While the city serves as a beacon of economic opportunity for millions of India’s internal migrant labourers, a primary source of their hardship is the high level of informalisation embedded in their work as daily wagers or self-employed, which leaves them vulnerable (Breman 2013; Srivastava 2020). However, following the writings of Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste* (Ambedkar [1936], 1989), the city is also seen to offer freedom, as an anonymous space for negotiating social differences (Shah 2006; Gidwani 2006), and potential for social justice and empowerment (Parthasarathy 2013), apart from offering material opportunity, and an escape from the darkness of the village (Parry 2003).

Urban experience and hence political action by migrant labourers are, on the one hand, shaped by the state while, on the other hand, can be traced to their everyday encounters of navigating their urban existence in the city – by working and living in the city. In experiencing marginality, discrimination, violence, etc., migrant labourers struggle *in* the city; however, they actively seek it as a space to find work, freedom, and empowerment in their struggle for

the city. It is in these contrasting and contradictory urban experiences of struggling *in* and struggling *for* the city that the city can be seen as the “*space for struggle and claims, as a site for a struggle for justice*” (Samaddar 2018, 15). One evidence of such contradictory urban experience of migrant workers in cities is the case of migrants from northeast India in Delhi and Bangalore- who on the one hand face racism, violence, discrimination while, on the other hand, manage to create a sense of place in the city (McDuié-Ra 2013; Karlsson and Kikon 2017). Moreover, even incidents of factories shutting down in Delhi in the early 2000s<sup>6</sup> or the earlier episodes of migrant labourers fleeing the city<sup>7</sup> did not deter both old migrant workers from returning to the city or new migrant workers coming to the city.

The recent episode of the Covid-19 lockdown ordered by the state leading to the exodus initially, and later, the return of migrant labourers to the city reiterates the contradictions in their urban experience while at the same time sheds light on the struggle of migrant labourers in sharing and expressing their common experience of injustice.

### **COVID-19 Lockdown, ‘Crisis’ of Migrant Labourers and Hegemony of the State**

Immediately after the lockdown was announced, millions of migrant labourers sought to leave the cities where they worked: images and news of them marching on foot, crowding at the bus stops, cycling thousands of miles, using personal networks to arrange for transport to get back to their homes in villages, were circulated widely – so much so that the lockdown turned into a ‘crisis’ of migrant labour in the country. While the suddenly announced and unplanned lockdown orders rendered the migrant workers visible from being ‘hidden’ in the informal economy, it also worsened their already existing insecurity, fear and uncertainties.<sup>8</sup>

What stood out starkly was the state’s ambiguous relationship with migrant labourers in its hegemonic approach towards combating the pandemic. On the one hand, there were coercive measures, such as putting lockdown violators in temporary jails;<sup>9</sup> while on the other hand, rolling out unclear yet frequent government orders about who, among the labourers, could move, by what means of transport and who could not; deepened their confusions, problems and uncertainties about the pandemic. Justifying the lockdown orders, Prime Minister Modi sought recourse for his actions by highlighting the life-death situation due to the virus, seeking forgiveness from the poor for ordering a complete lockdown in the country without any notice<sup>10</sup> and making appeals to the public on moral grounds of sacrifice and discipline.<sup>11</sup>

In responding to the effects of the pandemic on the poor, while on the one hand, relief packages and welfare schemes were rolled out under the name of initially, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, and later, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Abhiyaan; on the other hand, labour laws were suspended for reviving the industries<sup>12</sup> to consolidate further the existing ‘Ease of Doing Business’ policy framework in the country. This illustrates Sinha’s (2017) emphasis on the state’s hegemonic processes through the operation of both pro-business and pro-poor strategies in supporting capital accumulation.

It is in this context of the state's response that one needs to locate the experience of migrant labourers in India's COVID-19 lockdown during the different phases of the lockdown.

### **Narratives of a Shared Experience of Injustice: Migrant Labourers during Lockdown**

The first phase of the lockdown (25 March–14 April) saw the mass exodus of migrant labourers on foot from different cities across the country while the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) restricted the movement of migrant labourers by releasing its first order (MHA 2020a). By mid-April, MHA passed another order for the movement of intra-state migrant labourers (MHA 2020b). In the second phase of the lockdown (15 April–13 May) that followed the MHA's second order, there was crowding at bus stops and train stations. However, only migrant workers within each state were allowed to move, albeit only by buses. It was only at the end of April that new orders for the interstate movement of migrant labourers came in with restrictions on the means of transport (MHA 2020c). However, by then, work on construction sites in 'non-hotspot' areas for coronavirus was allowed to resume.<sup>13</sup> While interstate migrant labourers were clamouring to go home, the new order for them to resume work caught them by surprise. In fact, in the subsequent phase of the lockdown (4 May–17 May), construction builders were exerting pressure on the state governments to retain the workers in the city.<sup>14</sup> Having allowed only buses to be used as the means of transport until two phases of the lockdown, *Shramik* (worker) Special trains were started on 1 May to mark the occasion of International Labour Day. However, the decision of operating trains was initially left to different states. Moreover, the Shramik Special trains left much to be desired,<sup>15</sup> with their chaotic running, lack of arrangements for food and water, and deaths during the journey.<sup>16</sup>

During the different phases of the lockdown, between its start and until 31 May, the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) received distress calls from around 17,000 daily wagers and construction workers from Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh.<sup>17</sup> They were mostly stranded in the states of Maharashtra and Karnataka, Delhi and Haryana (SWAN 2020b). The NGO Gram Vaani's *Saajha Manch* – a mobile platform for workers – also received 8,000 distress calls from migrant labourers of Bihar, Jharkhand and Uttar Pradesh, working in the factories of Haryana, Gujarat, Delhi NCR and Tamil Nadu. Of these, 3,000 calls were from workers who were using the platform for the first time (Gram Vaani Community Media 2020).

Distress calls received by SWAN (2020a) during the initial days of the lockdown beginning 24 March 2020 revealed the workers' frustration with their employers. From mid-March, employers started to lay off their workers or not pay wages – acting directly against government orders, while the contractors, too, abandoned the migrant workers (Adhikari et al. 2020). A livelihood survey across 12 states during the lockdown in India indicates a

massive increase in unemployment with a corresponding fall in earnings (Azim Premji University 2020). Another survey covering 10,000 migrant workers in the city of Hyderabad revealed that 90 per cent of the workers did not receive wages while 97 per cent could not get ration in the city.<sup>18</sup> Some of the worker testimonies from reports produced by SWAN are presented here.

Sanjay Sahni from Bihar who works in Tiruppur in a textile company where he is paid weekly wages said, “I need money desperately as I have to pay rent or I will be evicted. I also need money for medicines.” (SWAN 2020a, 15)

“*Kaam bandh, paisa bandh*” (Work stops, money stops), said Shyam Pandit from Jharkhand stranded in Mumbai as his employer had offered him and others nothing (SWAN 2020a, 19)

Amod from Bihar working in Delhi said, “My family has three children, and one of the adults is diabetic and a heart patient. I do not have money to buy rations or medicines” (SWAN 2020a, 20).

In Delhi NCR, there were cases of migrant labourers going back home having received no support from their employers, while in Gujarat, migrants registered cases against their employers (Gram Vaani Community Media 2020).

Other experiences of distress for the workers arose from the absence of state support or its timely reach. In the course of a survey done by the Centre for Equity Studies (CES 2020), a stranded migrant said, “*Bhagwan bharse chal rha hai kyunki sarkar se koi umeed hai nahin; woh bas ghoshana kar deti hai, mara jata hai gareeb*” (We are left to fend for ourselves because we do not have any expectations from the government; they just make sudden announcements, it is the poor who pay the price). For instance, soon after the central government announced a relief package to support construction workers, a study of 3,200 migrant construction workers from north and central India exposed the gaps in the social protection system, with 94 per cent of the workers unable to access welfare schemes because of the absence of ID cards (Jan Sahas 2020). The survey by Azim Premji University (2020) also pointed out that only 49% of the respondents had received some form of cash transfer, and more than 33 per cent of migrant workers had taken loans, mostly from informal sources – friends, relatives, moneylenders, contractors, local shops – to cover expenses during the lockdown.

A survey of 10,672 migrant workers conducted by the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in the city of Hyderabad revealed that 97 per cent of the workers did not have ration cards while 76 per cent did not receive 12 kg rice and Rs 500 as promised by the Telangana government.<sup>19</sup> SWAN (2020a) reported that more than 90 per cent of 11,159 migrant workers stranded in

various states did not receive rations from the government between 8 April and 13 April. It was clear that the lockdown was turning into a crisis of hunger (Parulkar and Naik 2020). Among the migrant labourers from Bihar working in Kasargod district in Kerala, one of them shared their distress through Gram Vaani's mobile platform:

We have no provisions. We get rice and dal from the ration shop, but we have nothing to use to cook. We used to buy [fuel] oil, but that requires a walk of 10 km, and we are afraid to go out now for fear of policemen beating us up. We do get food from the government, but it is only once a day, and it is provided at different times each day –sometimes 2 pm, sometimes 3. It is *mota* (thick) *chawal* (rice) and *kele ka sabzi* (banana vegetable); no *dal* (Gram Vaani Community Media 2020).

One week into the lockdown by the end of March 2020, lawyers Prashant Bhushan and Cheryl D. Souza filed a petition in the Supreme Court to uphold the right of migrant labourers to a life of dignity. However, the Government of India refused to provide comprehensive support and shifted the burden of wages and shelter onto the landlords and employers.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, as Harsh Mander pointed out:

[The] Supreme Court did not pay heed to other petitions about starving families; police brutality towards workers who attempted to leave their homes to access food in the feeding centres; employers' associations writing to the Court about their inability to pay wages; and about landlords evicting their worker tenants because of their inability to pay rent.<sup>21</sup>

While the initial response of migrant labourers highlights their plight, with the loss of jobs and lack of food or accommodation, they also convey their deep sadness, pain and anguish. Many had to rely on informal sources for money or charity from civil society. The findings of the CES survey (2020) indicated that when it came to post-lockdown uncertainties, interstate migrants were worse off in comparison with intra-state migrants, while those working in native states were more optimistic about job prospects. Despite these differences, migrant labourers belonging to different origin states working in different cities shared a common sense of loss, insecurity, uncertainty, vulnerability developed through a common experience of being migrants, reinforcing their struggles *in* the city.

Along with the distress resulting from losing their jobs, migrant labourers struggles *in* the city were aggravated by the apathy and neglect of the state, which triggered frustration and helplessness. Comments such as “*Aisa hamare saath kyun kiya, ye kahan ka nyay hai, hume ghar jana hai*” (Why did you do this to us? Is this justice? We want to go home) capture their sense of injustice. Despite their struggles *in* the city, 41 per cent of the migrants surveyed by SWAN (2020b) said they would stay in the city because they were anxious about unpaid rent and loans and had no cash to travel or survive at home. Migrant workers,

in this sense, were navigating between their struggles *in* the city, encompassing a shared sense of injustice experienced due to the lockdown and their continual struggle *for* the city as the space for meeting their needs for survival while providing the opportunity to work.

### ***We are poor, what and who should we blame?***

To begin with, the migrant labourers were caught in a double bind, battling hunger and coronavirus. They did fear the virus, but they feared hunger even more.<sup>22</sup> This expression captures the reality of migrant labourers: “*Hum log garib aadmi hain, kamake khane wale aadmi hain ... humko dekhne wala bhagwan hi hai*” (We are poor people, we live hand-to-mouth ... to look after us, there is only God).<sup>23</sup>

At another level, the migrant labourers outlined their ‘fate’ as the poor who are always distant and isolated from the state and spoke of how the Modi *sarkar* (government) does not value them:

*Garib ka koi zindagi nahi hota hai, hai hi nahi. Jo milta bhi hai sarkar se to idhar aate aate poora upar wala kha jaata hai, garib ko milta kahan hai* (The poor don’t have a life to speak of, no life at all. Whatever little is expected to come our way from the government is siphoned off by those sitting above us. The poor are left with nothing).<sup>24</sup>

*Modi ki nazron mein hum keedein hi hain na, waisi maut marenge* (We are, after all, insects in the eyes of Modi, so we will have to die that kind of death) (SWAN 2020a, 9).

*Maybe when Modiji decided to do this [lockdown], nobody told him about us. Maybe he does not know about us.*<sup>25</sup>

The above expressions convey the migrant workers’ sense of the ‘negligence’ of the state towards them during the pandemic, which accentuated their sense of fatalism.

### ***An exodus of resistance?***

While the state’s apathy towards them was evoked clearly in the initial response of migrant labourers, they took to expressing their grievance by setting off for their faraway villages on foot.<sup>26</sup> As it became evident to them that they were the ‘rejects’ of India<sup>27</sup>, their act of returning to their village, defying the lockdown orders, could be seen as a rejection of and resistance to the state.<sup>28</sup> The exodus of labourers has been one of the most potent modes of resistance in the history of labour politics.<sup>29</sup> Sengupta and Jha (2020) point out that in the past, the mass exodus has occurred due to famines, floods, drought, etc., but the exodus of



migrants from cities – their place of work – is a relatively new phenomenon. Similar episodes of exodus in the context of state action have occurred in the recent past.<sup>30</sup> Ajaz Ashraf relating the mass exodus of migrant labourers in India to the exodus featured in John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* highlights that the act of migrant labourers' going back – on foot, on cycles, or by other means of transport – forged new solidarities, one among them being the shift in language from 'I' to 'We',<sup>31</sup> conveying a shared sense of grievance of being 'migrants' to the city.

### ***Questioning being stranded and held captive: Demanding dignity***

As a result of the mass exodus, migrant labourers were seen either as lockdown victims or violators with their bodies as carriers of the disease. MHA's initial order highlighted that the movement by migrant labourers constituted a violation of lockdown measures on social distancing and that they should be put in temporary shelters to stop their movement while those who had reached their villages were to be put in quarantine centres (MHA 2020a). Besides being treated brutally by the police during their journey back home, new forms of 'othering' were invoked for migrant labourers, such as chemicals sprayed on them as a 'sanitizing' measure.<sup>32</sup>

The sense of injustice was apparent in the migrant labourers' language, questioning their experience of state action – the violence and control<sup>33</sup> unleashed upon them during the lockdown. Caught walking back to their village and being put in shelters or indoor stadiums turned temporary jails,<sup>34</sup> a migrant labourer from Uttar Pradesh remarked, "*Corona se humara kya lena dena? Woh toh ameer logon ki beemari hai aur videsh se aayi hai. Phir hume kyun is jail mein band kiya gaya hai?*" (What do we have to do with coronavirus? It is a disease of the rich, which has come from abroad. Then why are we being kept in this jail?).<sup>35</sup> A migrant labourer from Uttar Pradesh expressed his sense of being held captive, like a convict: "None of us was allowed to leave, sometimes not even allowed out for fresh air but no one was able to tell us under what law they were holding us captive" [*qaid keeya* was the term he used].<sup>36</sup>

Adding to their predicament were the confusing government orders on movement by trains. Migrant labourers' failures in their attempts to register for Shramik Special trains made them realize this was deliberate, arising from governments and employers' intent to keep them in the city (Gram Vaani Community Media 2020). Even as they recognized and questioned the state's deliberate attempts to dehumanize them, many migrant labourers waited for further orders/information from the government during the lockdown, though many others walked back home (Gram Vaani Community Media 2020). Perceiving assistance from the state as a tactic to control them instead of relieving them of their distress,<sup>37</sup> migrant labourers saw their dignity being stripped off, given the long queues for food and ration, stampede-like situations at railway stations for accessing food during their journeys, etc.



Reiterating their identity as labourers, one among a group of migrant workers walking home asserted, *“Mazdoor hain, bhikhaari nahin, sir; bhookh se ladna hai toh gaon me ladenge, apnon ke saath, is ajab shehar mein nahin”* (We are labourers, not beggars, sir; if we must battle hunger, we will do it in our village, along with our own people, not in this strange city).<sup>38</sup>

Beyond demanding dignity, migrant labourers also sought empathy directly from PM Modi. Identifying himself with the prime minister, a migrant labourer running a tea shop remarked, *“Modiji toh apne aap ko chaiwallah batatey hain, unko toh pata hona chahiye ki ek dum se chai kee dukaan band kar dein toh kya beetegee”* (Modiji says he worked in a tea shop, he should know what it would like if a tea shop was shut down suddenly).<sup>39</sup>

The narrative of asking for empathy and dignity gradually took a turn towards something more radical and performative – in the form of protests on the streets and highways, at construction sites and labour spots in the city, etc.

### ***Protesting for food, wages and going home: Us vs them***

As the lockdown progressed and began to be extended, migrant labourers started to lose patience. Those waiting for further information, hoping that the lockdown would be lifted or movement allowed, were utterly disheartened. And for those who could move, the need to seek permission from home states added another dimension to their miseries.

The sense of injustice among migrant workers intensified even as a clear demarcation appeared between those left stranded in cities and those who managed to return home. First, even by the time of the extension of lockdown announced in mid-April, migrant labourers had no clue when they would be able to travel. Second, while the movement of intra-state migrant labourers was allowed, interstate migrant labourers still had to stay put.

Caught in the politics of approval and documentation between state governments and the Central government,<sup>40</sup> while migrant labourers stranded in one state got the opportunity to travel back, those in other states did not. This aggravated the frustration of migrant labourers who felt cheated in states such as Karnataka, where trains were cancelled, while those like them in Kerala were able to board trains to go back home. Besides enhancing their distress, such politics painted a narrative of *us vs them* among migrant labourers stranded in different cities. It is in light of such developments that protests emerged and intensified.

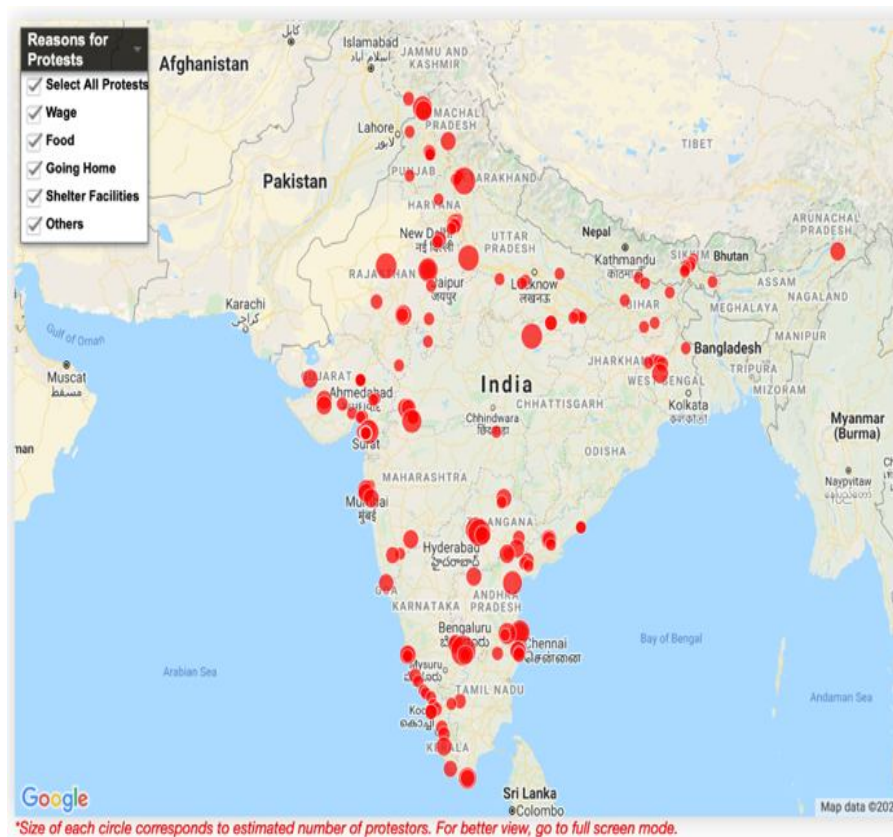
There were protests early on in the states of Gujarat and Kerala in the first phase of the lockdown and in Gujarat in the second phase of lockdown as well.<sup>41</sup> Protests also started to erupt in other states such as Karnataka, Maharashtra and Telangana once the extension of lockdown was ordered on 14 April 2020, and subsequently, movement of migrant labourers

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was allowed.<sup>42</sup> By the start of lockdown 3.0 from early May, the intensity of protests increased across the country.

Slogans such as “*Kaam nahi chahiye, paisa nahi chahiye, hume bas ghar jana hai*” (We do not want work, we do not want money, we just want to go home) rang out during protests. In demanding to go back home, migrant labourers from states such as Bihar and Bengal made agitated demands to the chief ministers of their respective states to call them back to their home states.<sup>43</sup> Migrant labourers took to stone pelting, blocking national highways and damaging property while police resorted to lathi-charge and arrests. Figures 1 and 2 highlight the widespread protests by migrant labourers for wages, food, shelter, going home, etc. across the country amidst the COVID-19 lockdown.

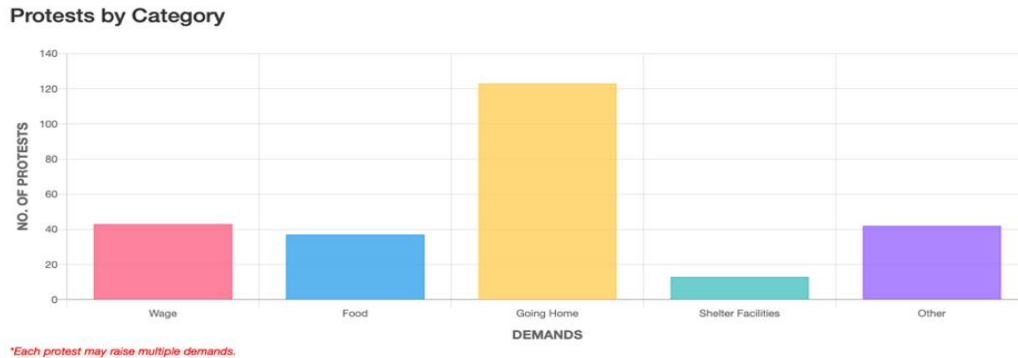
**Figure 1: Map showing migrant labourers' acts of resistance during the lockdown**



Source: <https://www.mwsn.in/resistancemap/>

The size of each circle on the map gives an insight into the intensity of protests in different cities in the country.

Figure 2: Protests by migrants based on their demands



Source: <https://www.mwsn.in/resistancemap/>

A total of 158 protests were recorded across the country, with more than half the protests concentrated in states such as Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Kerala and Maharashtra.<sup>44</sup> Largely, the migrant workers' demands related to food, wages, going home. Of all the demands, going back to their villages has been the key demand.

### Reading Expressions of Injustice: Emerging Political Subjectivities

Even in 'normal' times before the COVID-19 lockdown, by and large, migrant labourers have remained absent from the social protection regime of the state (Wetlesen 2016), absent from development discourse and process of claim-making,<sup>45</sup> and absent from trade unions<sup>46</sup> or in constant struggle with them (Wetlesen 2016, Prasad-Aleyamma 2018). Recently, the figure of the worker-migrant has "emerged as a political constituency either as an object of violence (Bhaiyas in Maharashtra), or as a social or economic 'outsider' (a longer history can be traced through the presence of 'Madrasis' in Maharashtra or 'Biharis' in Delhi), and as a vote-bank group (most recently seen in the Delhi elections of February 2020)".<sup>47</sup> However, the COVID-19 lockdown, initiated by state action to contain the spread of the pandemic, presented conditions in which migrant labourers in India, who were otherwise hidden and absent from the vocabulary of political action, laid out their narrative rooted in an experience of injustice, amidst the silence from trade unions.<sup>48</sup>

How do we make sense of, or read, this narrative of migrant workers with regard to their political expression? What does it mean for the emergence of political subjectivities?

As a result of the lockdown, most of the migrant labourers lost their jobs and hence their wages, and they were left with no accommodation in the city. Moreover, many of them were facing delays in the payment of their wages even before the lockdown. Their response was to go back home or make demands to do so in this moment of crisis. The trajectory of

expressing their sense of injustice encompassed emotive responses, acts of defiance, requests for relief and demands for food, wages, and to be sent back home. And, despite vowing they would not return to the city, given their terrible experiences, they have now started to return to the city in large numbers to look for work.<sup>49</sup>

Migrant labourers' subjectivities shaped during the lockdown fell within the state's hegemonic regime marked by both a uniform and a general experience of injustice filled with moments of ambiguity (Desai 2015). On the one hand, they maintained the status quo by coming back to work in the city despite their narratives of suffering in the city; on the other hand, they had earlier subverted the orders of the state in walking back or demanding to go home. In becoming subjects of compassion while being provided with relief, they also negotiated with the state apparatus during different lockdown phases. What has been unique is that migrant labourers have taken to sharing their plight on social media platforms such as Tiktok and Facebook,<sup>50</sup> demanding a government response in these times of distress. For instance, a migrant from Odisha, also a teacher, produced the rap song 'Government, give us an answer', which went viral on Youtube.<sup>51</sup>

In this sense, the COVID-19 lockdown produced the figure of the migrant labourer as a political one through different processes of subjectification. Addressing them as 'guest workers', 'partners in development', not locals but outsiders, etc., added to their subjectivities. Moreover, Chief Minister of Bihar, Nitish Kumar, opined that no one who moves within the country should be called a migrant.<sup>52</sup>

### **Towards Justice beyond the Pandemic**

The lockdown once again exposed the relation of the state with migrant labourers working in the city. The state, on the one hand, continues to neglect them by marginalizing them; on the other hand, it seeks to counsel and persuade the migrants to act like citizens in situations like the lockdown, while being completely disenfranchised otherwise.<sup>53</sup>

However, what emerged as a response from migrant labourers during the lockdown was their political expression in narrating their shared experience of injustice. Ranging from blaming themselves as the poor to demanding dignity, questioning and waiting for state instructions and response, and finally staging protests, they expressed and countered their experiences of injustice during the lockdown. Migrant labourers' experience of injustice during the lockdown can be broadly located between their struggle *for* the city as a space for opportunity and their struggle *in* the city leading to exclusion. Going beyond the pandemic, the relation of the state with migrant labourers needs to be located within the language of justice rather than using the language of compassion.<sup>54</sup> A possible step in this direction would be a change in policy by the state for bringing about structural changes in the lives of migrant labourers or enabling such changes.<sup>55</sup>

**Notes**

1. <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/migrant-labour-role-india-lockdown-tariq-thachil-6343869/>.
2. <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/migrants-movement-injustice-india-lockdown-6405229/>.
3. <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/letters/coronavirus-lockdown-germany-nhs-scotland-a9465991.html>.
4. <https://theprint.in/talk-point/mass-exodus-of-migrants-are-they-the-covid-19-lockdown-violators-or-victims/391324/>.
5. <https://discoversociety.org/2020/05/11/invisible-lives-the-place-of-migrant-workers-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>.
6. <http://www.saheliwomen.org/solidarity/factory-closures-in-delhi-and-the-delhi-janwaadi-adhikar-manch>.
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