



Touch of Care: too little, too slow?

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On the 25th of March, 2020 the Indian government led by Narendra Modi imposed what has been frequently labelled the world's largest lockdown. He gave the nation less than 24 hours' notice, following confirmation of the first few hundred cases. This prompt action came in a context in which the BJP government was already facing a backlash against the Citizenship Amendment Act and the nationwide roll-out of the National Register of Citizens in early 2020. There was also critique of a sluggish economy as the government began its second term. The government's decisiveness before widespread community transmission of the Covid-19 virus garnered it praise for prioritising public health, at a time when many developed countries were still hesitating to implement similar lockdowns. But this praise turned out to be short-lived. In the following weeks, news of inter-state migrant labourers – now out of work and wages – who had set out for hundreds of kilometres on foot back to their villages, received a lot of publicity. With the complete suspension of public transport services, images of exhausted migrants (and their families), aggravated by incidents of deaths due to heat, hunger, thirst and road accidents, drew global attention to the Indian state's inability to look after its most vulnerable population groups.

The Modi government responded to the situation by extending welfare provisions.¹ Existing PDS (Public Distribution System) schemes which entitle most individuals to subsidised rates for up to 5kg of grains were extended under the "*PM Garib kalyan Ann Yojana*" (Prime Ministerial Poor Welfare Food Scheme) to provide twice that allocation, plus an additional 1 kg of pulses per person, free of cost, for the next three months. The central government held a press release to announce the scheme, boasting that it would not allow 'especially any poor family' to suffer for the disruption in the next months.

Desperate to curtail the mass exodus of migrant workers, which carried the risk of spreading the virus from cities to far flung villages, proposals were also made to extend ex gratia cash payments to the poor, including migrant workers stranded in different states. While the central government announced that 200 million *Jan Dhan*² account holders would receive 1500 INR (16.5 €) during the next three months, states came up with their own complementary

schemes. The government of West-Bengal, for instance, introduced the *Sneher Paras*³ scheme to make a one-off payment of 1000 INR to migrant workers from West-Bengal stuck in other parts of the country. But, as my own ethnographic findings have revealed, welfare schemes and relief packages such as these hardly translate into actual help on the ground for migrant workers. To access welfare schemes such as *PM Garib kalyan Ann Yojana*, one needs to possess a state issued ration card. To benefit from the financial help that states like West-Bengal are offering to migrants stuck elsewhere, one needs to have a bank account. In practice, (as I show in Chaki, 2020) the majority of migrant workers lack such documentation and bank accounts: they remain registered in their native villages, even when they have been working in cities for years. The murky arena of informality in which most migrant workers end up, coupled with their dream of returning one day to their villages leaves them in no position to enjoy basic entitlements, let alone exercise other civil and political rights (Chaki, 2020). The migrant worker crisis that India is witnessing was not created by the pandemic or the ensuing lockdown. Rather, Covid-19 has exposed the systematic exclusion from citizenship rights that has always been the fate of migrant workers.

For industries in states like Gujarat and Maharashtra which are largely dependent on labourers from states such as Bihar, Odisha and Uttar Pradesh to thrive, urgent policy interventions on the basis of a holistic understanding of the country's migrant workforce need to be implemented. An anthropologically informed understanding of migrant labourers can aid such efforts. The Indian state needs to understand its migrant workforce as "multifaceted human being[s] with complex needs and demands" rather than simply perceiving them "through the lens of their economic impoverishment" (Nagpal & Srivastava, 2020). I have shown in my dissertation how, on top of their activities in the urban industrial economy, these workers remain connected to the subsistence economy back in their villages and an "emotional economy" that "places them between the demands of home and the promises of development" (Lindquist 2009: 18). Rather than perpetuating a system that requires workers to overcome bureaucratic hurdles and transfer their registration documents to the city in order to be able to access basic entitlements, policy makers need to recognize the different economies in which these workers are simultaneously active and develop new ways to bring them into the fold of state redistribution.

One possible step towards realizing this would be a de-fragmentation of the PDS system by means of an acceleration of the "one nation, one ration card" (ONORC) scheme, conceptualised back in 2011, has recently resurfaced in parliament. A nationwide implementation of ONORC would extend food security to thousands of migrants by allowing them to collect their food grain entitlement from any ration shop in the country. While some state governments have agreed to this principle, the central government has not yet managed to convince all of them to do so. Had the ONORC been in place when the nationwide lockdown

went into effect, migrant workers' experience could have been different, at least in terms of the desperation borne out of food insecurity.

The immediate response of many states has been to prioritize economic recovery, even if this is at the cost of the labourers' welfare. Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh relaxed most of their labour laws to attract investment. Himachal Pradesh and Punjab revised their Factory Act to permit working hours to rise from 8 to 12. My ethnography has revealed that such labour laws in practice have very little effect and do not serve the workers that they are designed to protect. Rather, they provide a fertile breeding ground for license-inspector-raj and rent seeking (see also Bhattacharjee, 2020). The economic impact of the pandemic has drawn the states' attention to labour laws. However, instead of salvaging the economy at the cost of the labourers' welfare, it is high time to rationalise archaic labour laws and establish a frame in which workers' basic rights are laid down and then implemented.

Notes

¹ Press release from the Finance Ministry on the 26th of March, 2020. Source: <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaselframePage.aspx?PRID=1608345> (last accessed June 2020).

² The '*PM Jan Dhan Yojana*' (roughly 'Prime Ministerial Public Wealth Scheme') was launched in 2014. It is a financial inclusion program to promote the opening of a bank account by every household in the country. The scheme permits the waiving of certain pre-conditions for regular savings accounts, such as the maintenance of a minimum balance. It allows state welfare benefits to be transferred directly to the registered account. Source: <https://www.pmjdy.gov.in/scheme> (last accessed June 2020).

³ Loosely translated (from Bengali) as 'touch of care'. Source: <https://www.wb.gov.in/COVID-19/OC11.pdf> (last accessed June 2020).

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