

India: The exodus or the dignity of the poor

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There is a great dignity in the stoic march of India's workers as they leave India's national capital, one of the world's most populated cities, and head to their villages hundreds of miles away. It is the relatively healthy that have decided to walk their way out of joblessness and impending penury to return to their villages in the face of the 21 day lockdown announced by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to combat the spread of Corona Virus. As India walks home, many say they will get food to survive during the harvest season in the village. In the plains of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, where most of the migrants are headed, wheat is sown in November-December and harvested in April.

Journalists who have permission to venture out in the national capital would see groups of walkers, starting from the southern extremities of Delhi where there is a border with Gurugram in Haryana state, to the border on the east of the city with Uttar Pradesh, where the Anand Vihar Bus terminal is located. According to google maps the road journey winding through Delhi is 47 kilometres. From Anand Vihar, now completely overwhelmed by a sea of humanity, people are hoping to get buses to their towns, districts and villages in Uttar Pradesh. Some will have to cross Uttar Pradesh and reach Bihar, further away.

This is an account of what is happening in Delhi though Mumbai and other Indian metros have also witnessed large reverse migrations. The really destitute are not in a position to undertake this long march. They are too malnourished, poor in health, lacking hope and prospects. They will remain and migrate towards shelter homes and hope to get two meals a day. Some could die and we would not know what the cause was, but a constant state of hunger and homelessness would not have helped.

Those that are walking are relatively healthy men, young to middle aged, that came to the city to supplement rural incomes of their families in the village. There are some women and children too, who have been pulled out of Delhi schools as the father, husband, brother lost work. At the start of the journey in Delhi, the children are nicely dressed in shiny clothes, girls with clips on their hair, to be seen by the waiting relatives in the village.

But the majority of the Indians walking home are groups of men who were providing for their families in the villages by migrating to the city. They are proud and do not wish to become basket cases who would be dependent on the kindness of others or be reduced to eating in food kitchens. It is acutely humiliating for many of the skilled workers to lose income and homes overnight and they have no choice to join what could be one of the largest migrations we have witnessed in India post Partition.

The stories the migrants tell have a common theme. They were employed in a small unit that shut down. Some got their wage, others did not and some were just given enough money to reach their villages. The contractors and owners told them to go home. Four to five rented a room near their place of work and they could not have made rent and brought food without their earning. They had no choice but to depart, their lives packed into a backpack, some food in a plastic bag. Many managed a smile and said they were looking forward to reaching their loved ones in the villages

after the hell that the city had become.

Every now and then while walking, they would take a break and rest on the pavement. On the Nizamuddin bridge that leads to the Eastern border of Delhi, a group of professional house painters were taking a rest in their journey to Banda district in Uttar Pradesh. Their landlord had asked them to leave and their contractor paid them enough to get home. In the Mehrauli-Chattarpur area of South Delhi, a group of stone-cutters were going to Etawah and Aligarh, some with wives and children. Work had stopped and they could no longer live in the city. At the UP border, a large group of tailors were headed to Badaun. They had worked in a garment manufacturing unit in a part of north east Delhi that was recently hit by terrible violence. Their small business survived the riots but not the lockdown. They hope they would return but were unsure when that would be possible.

In the face of so much human suffering one must ask what was the government thinking when it announced a lockdown with four hours notice and then cut off the lifeline of Indian railways and interstate transport? Did they fail to understand the nature of the informal sector that employs the majority of Indian workers? Did our planners not know that people would be out of job and home in a matter of hours? Did they not know that we are not Italy or China but a wondrous large country of amazing brave people who are, however, economically very vulnerable and have no social net.

A tragedy of human and economic despair is unfolding across India and we appear to be clueless.

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