



# Vicissitudes of Life in Cities of Maharashtra in times of COVID-19

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The article reflects upon the precarious work and living conditions of migrant workers of urban Maharashtra. The unprecedented and inevitable lockdown to contain the spread of coronavirus has left the workers without source of income which makes it impossible for them to buy food and pay rent. This paper would argue that the specific case of migrants gathering in Mumbai amidst the lockdown is situated within the larger context of their lived experiences of distressed rural areas. The whole project of building the urban depends solely on migrant labour. However, migrants have never benefited from their contributions towards urban development. History of urban planning of cities in Maharashtra shows that migrants are left to fend for themselves as their social security is completely neglected. Having situated the problem as such, the article suggests ways in which a collaboration with citizens and the private sector can be created, in order to equip the government to tackle this health and socio-economic crisis at large.

With news of the extension of lockdown till May 3rd, nervous migrant workers had thronged Bandra on April 14th. The event posed a new problem for the Maharashtra government. Due to the pandemic, the scale of deprivation migrants face is huge. The sudden gathering of migrant workers at Bandra on 14th April, after the PM's public address, brings into notice the ways in which rural interacts with urban to produce a segmented labour market.

Various uncomfortable questions about urban life, that haven't been treated adequately have surfaced now viz., workers engaged in precarious jobs, exploitation of labor, incompetency of the health infrastructure, consumerism, poverty, gender roles in domestic spaces. At the heart of the issues concerning migrants, lies structural inequality maintained within urban cities. Apart from the complexities of class difference, there are many concerns that need to be addressed in order to comprehend the ongoing issues of public health, economy, and an overall social crisis. This article highlights the interconnections between the process of migration in Maharashtra and the vulnerabilities of migrants concerning their social reproduction. The relationship is examined in the context of rampant withdrawal of all support from the government in neoliberal economy. The incident of 14th April has drawn criticism. Some questions that emerged after this incident are dealt with in the following sections.

## **Who are these people on the streets?**

As per the Census of 2011, The Urban Agglomeration of Mumbai which includes the districts of Mumbai City, Mumbai Suburban, and Thane had a population of 2.35 crore. Of this total population, 1.01 crore, or 43.02 per cent, were recorded as migrants as per the definition of the Census authorities. Mumbai had 41.01 lakh inter-state migrants in 2001; in 2011, this number stood at 46.44 lakh, with an increase of 13.22 per cent. The corresponding numbers for intra-state migrants were 28.16 lakh and 43.44 lakh, an increase of 52.78 per cent. Besides, an analysis of National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), the 64th Round on migration revealed that out of every 1000 migrants in urban Maharashtra, 370 migrate from villages within the state. while 198 from villages outside the state border (Rajadhyaksha, 2012).

The old political narrative of 'son of soil' has been used by politicians, which has often been translated into discriminatory behavior against migrant workers from the Northern states. It is evident that Mumbai attracts migrants from all parts of India. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that in past few years, a significant number of migrants in urban Maharashtra are from within the state. The presence of large number of migrants in Maharashtra, particularly Mumbai, depicts a case of rural-urban divide. However, it also shows the case of complexities within the rural-urban divide. The ways in which rural-urban lives and economies are dependent on each other has become evident at the time of this crisis.

## Why are the people on the streets?

Most of the migrant workers from northern states work in the construction sector for infrastructure projects in the cities. With ever-expanding urbanization, most of the migrants are finding employment in the construction sector much closer to rural areas. The inter-state migration in Maharashtra has to be seen in the light of ongoing rural distress and wide regional disparity. In order to confront the reality of migration without placing emphasis on the inter/intra migratory trends, one needs to consider the fact that migrant workers have been treated as a blind spot by the administrators. According to legislative provisions of the Inter-state Migrant Workers Act (1979) and Street Vendor Act (2014), the administration should keep records of migrant workers. However, there is little supervision over the working conditions of the migrant workers.

Hence, due to the lack of regulations, there is a large scale of deprivation despite the declaration of relief funds, direct transfers, and distribution of ration/food by the state. Academics and activists working closely with migrants to provide aid have reported that the relief funds and rations are reaching only a minuscule percentage of the population. A survey of 11,159 migrant workers stranded in different states found that between April 8th and April 13th, more than 90 percent did not receive rations from the government. From March 27th to April 13th, 70 percent of surveyed workers had only less than Rs.200 left with them. In Maharashtra, 99 percent of surveyed workers did not receive rations (Stranded Workers Actions Network, April 20th, 2020, The Hindu). With no effective aid from the government during an unprecedented situation, migrant workers all over the country are seeking to return to the place they call home.

## Why are they vulnerable?

The migrant workers on the streets walking towards their homes, irrespective of which state they are from, are section of labour which is always in transit owing to the uncertainties in life due to lack of social security provisions at work. There are three aspects of transit labour in urban Maharashtra, one being the transitory jobs with no security/provisions. Such employment's availability depends on various factors such as seasons, economy, and times of crisis like that of an ongoing pandemic. Secondly, the work requiring movement across the city, for example the dabba-walas, the vendors on local trains, fisherwomen

and men, delivery and other service providers are labelled as 'informal'. This result in an incessant insecurity around their work. The third aspect is that of transitory lives not in terms of migration, but that of their living spaces or shelter after migration. For migrants, housing in urban spaces mean makeshift congested houses, bastis, or rental accommodation that is under constant supervision of state because it is termed as 'informal settlement'.

The constant emphasis on the contractualisation of jobs under neoliberal economy had created a reserve pool of labour, whose labour power can be used and discarded as per needed. The economy of India is currently predicated on labour markets where workers are not able to earn even the minimum prescribed wages. Lowering the cost of production by not regulating labour's working conditions, health and social security are enabling the economy to function, specifically in the case of small and micro-scale industries. Social reproduction theorists have always emphasized on capitalism privatizing the lives and life-making (Bhattacharya 2020). The global labour market has left workers to fend for themselves because it values commodity production while undervaluing labour.

Mumbai has a longstanding history of strong labour union disrupted by opening up of the economy and shutting down big industries to pave the way for alluring real-estate sector. Maharashtra's focus towards its primary sector has not been adequate which has resulted in acute rural distress, for the past few years. Mumbai being a primary center, receiving an influx of migrants, engaged in unstable, insecure labour in the city. After the outbreak of the pandemic, reports in print and digital media have described migrant's labour as 'essential' to run the economy. However, the past experiences of these workers of not being acknowledged by the state by placing migrants under the constant radar of 'illegal' or 'informal', the lack of assistance has been legitimized. This has been evident in the numerous cases of fire hazard, accidents, unsanitary working conditions and job security. The destruction of their homes and eviction is a harrowing experience for many workers. With no confidence in the state, they are left to fend for themselves at all times. In the case of the lockdown, that meant walking home for days on end. This lack of confidence despite the declaration of relief/funds is understandable as the state is failing to successfully reach out to these workers to ameliorate the issues that they are facing. Further their image as 'outsiders' is also pushing them towards further marginalization in these difficult times.

## **Involving Citizens, Local Authorities and Private Sector**

In times of lack of organization of employment and social security, it is the networks of migrant workers which have facilitated them to secure their place in cities. The large number of migrants gathered at the station, as reported by few media sources, were misinformed by a rumor trending over a news channel about re-opening of train and bus services. Whereas few other sources from media have reported that migrant workers had gathered to demand the transport facility to return to their homes. Setting aside the factors that contributed to this event, the ways in which these migrant networks function can be used as a source of information for providing them with aids. The neighborhoods of working-class population are known to local authorities, distribution of food/ration, and transferring money in their accounts is feasible. However, in order to efficiently address such a large number of people, we need to involve the public and raise awareness regarding the deprivation of migrants amidst this pandemic. The administration can carry this out through the public address of its plan and the ways in which it will be implemented. The state can effectively record number of targeted individuals and the spaces they occupy by collaborating with activists and organization already working on providing relief. Bringing in the economic and innovative capacity of private sector is also necessary for realizing these goals.

Various religious communities are working with the government to provide food to these essential workers as well as those left without work. NGOs and activists are opening up helplines for workers in distress. As laudable as these initiatives of citizens are, it is to be kept in mind that these services must be extended to the peripheral areas of cities, which have been always neglected leading to their marginalization. Besides, these forms of community help also have to be extended to spread the right information, protecting the migrants from stigmatisation at their place of living, distribution of masks and health care equipment at local health centers. Every functioning institutional machinery at the local level, could tie-up with the local MLAs and authorities for distribution of essentials to poor households irrespective of identity documents like ration card. The onset of a pandemic should not lead to a systemic minimizing other health risks that the public may face. Hence categorization of the population at ward level health officials as per their health profile and their treatments in non-COVID-19 hospitals should be taken into account. Collaboration between local citizens and police authorities for regulating price of goods

and rent in residential areas of migrant workers may offer some assurance so they refrain from moving towards rural areas.

Crowdfunding benefits for stressed workers by multi-million MNCs and app based companies may not be an adequate measures they seek to absolve themselves of their obligations towards their workers (Medappa and Taduri 2020) Companies (like Zomato, Dunzo, Ola, Uber, Swiggy) whose valuation stands at multi-million dollars and have till now operated as non-providers of labour services to their own workers (also sometimes known as gig-workers) should provide their workers with minimum income guarantee along with relaxation of the targets. The panic amongst workers is caused by no confidence in state authorities and future uncertainty. Therefore, it is now an appropriate time to take measures for recognizing economy's dependency on migrant workers, which has been due for long. Furthermore, we need to understand that lack of correct information and fast spread of misinformation are two key factors to reduce the adverse effects of this crisis. Many migrant workers lack the knowledge about government's relief plan as well as access to it. So far, there has been no concrete public notification of plan with which government is going to deal with starvation and destitution of migrants post the COVID-19 pandemic.

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