



*Covid 19 impact on
Destitute and Marginalised*

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Scarcity of food among the destitute and street dwellers at the early lockdown implementation stage were beyond any narrative. Restriction on vehicular, people movements and restrictions on grocery shops, shutting down of restaurants and unavailability of essential materials created panic which resulted in migrant exodus. Job losses and economic imbalance did not help majority migrants to survive in their beloved cities which helped them to follow their life dreams. It was like deserting a war zone to a much safer place. In migrants' case, the safe zone was their villages. Covid-19 turned out to be a silent killer while the government waged an effective medico-socio-psycho war against it. This helped in a great way to reduce regional malnutrition, starvation and increased mortality. Otherwise the city slums would have gone under the grips of famine.

According to the United Nations humanitarian criteria, even if there are food shortages with large numbers of people lacking nutrition, a famine is declared only when certain measures of mortality, malnutrition and hunger are met. The criteria thus are: 1) at least 20% of households in an area face extreme food shortages with a limited ability to cope 2) The prevalence of acute malnutrition in children exceeds 30% 3) The death rate exceeds two people per 10,000 people per day. The three stages to assess a famine are: near-scarcity; scarcity; and famine (*Famine Code of British Raj in India in 1883 Lord Ripon*). The destitute and street dwellers who live a 'near-scarcity' life on normal days were facing the second stage of famine: 'scarcity', during the Covid-19 pandemic. The reason for migrant

exodus can be attributed to experiencing 'scarcity' and a sense of danger due to longer lock downs.

The responses to fight against the Covid-19 challenges were tremendous. Individuals, clubs, religious-cultural-political organisations, NGO's & NPO's, corporate sectors were swung into acts of charity and were seen distributing the food boxes, fruits, water bottles, toiletry and sanitary items, distribution of free masks and setting up of hand washing facilities or sanitizer in almost all areas where hunger and suffering made life really difficult.

The Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 was invoked by the Government of India along with the Disaster management Act of 2005 to tackle effectively the challenges on the national front. Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 came into force to deal with the Bombay plague and has been used effectively to control many epidemics in the country including the 2018 Cholera spread in Gujarat state. Along with The Disaster Management Act of 2005, Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 became more powerful since it gave authorities more powers to act effectively and in a coordinated way under the leadership of the Prime Minister.

The government-imposed lockdown had its early hiccups when migrant exodus began all over the country. Though many grass root organisations had swung into actions with providing maximum support, migrant's feelings of insecurities were to be addressed at this time. Authorities with the support of local organisations started setting up special camps to protect the life of migrants with shelter, food and medical care which temporarily cooled down the urge to escape to safety, and running after every fake message and mass gatherings to catch dream trains. It helped in a great way to compensate the loss for migrants. Still the number of people who lived on the street kept rising and the charitable acts of good Samaritans and organisations matched up the demand. Out of many organisations and individuals few are still operative, providing food boxes even after 6 months of lockdown.

A group of volunteers from an organization still distribute 500 packets of hot lunch boxes every day to the destitute on the streets of Mumbai. They have been carrying it out for the last six months. Though the number of lunch boxes remain

the same, the volunteers notice the ethnicity of people who take away lunch boxes changing. The hungry hands kept changing from school children to widows, slum dwellers to migrants, street dwellers to the absolute destitute. Unprecedented impacts of Covid-19 included food insecurities among poor families since the income which they earned through daily wage work was no more and essential materials were beyond their reach.

On a regular school day, school attending children had access to daily mid-day meal facilities at their schools, which were now stopped due to sudden shut down. Later, the education department made sure that children get their regular mid-day meal. With even the local (vadapav) snack shops shut, children were hungrier than ever. Frantic purchases by common man were seen and the migrants, single parents, widows, poor and destitute families had no other option than being a mute spectator.

A group of volunteers started their first day of food distribution with 100 hot lunch boxes for their school children who were attending the daily classes. On day 3, it was 500 packets when their families also started collecting lunch boxes. The hunger for survival was high and volunteers had to specially reach out to persons who were unable to run behind occasional free food supplying vans. They focused on delivering the food boxes to people who were unable to move due to their old age, sickness and dehydration in the scorching April-May heat. The pandemic situation was overwhelming and no help went wasted.

Long term commitment has been always the backbone of any initiative, along with compassion and showing justice. Justice or more clearly showing social justice at the pandemic times was the idea for many. Many volunteers were students and ex-students from social organisations, schools, institutes and colleges. It was time for students who grew up or studied together to get into a small social act which will make a difference in their life, holistically. The untiring and relentless commitment of these individuals and micro-groups opened up new avenues like creating a new relationship with good hearted individuals and society: to come together to support the poor at these pandemic times.

Many remained on the streets since they had no homes to go to during the Covid-19 lock down. They had lost their homes since they were unable to pay their rents. Hence, these small social acts had to bridge the desperate survival gaps as an immediate positive result. These gaps were always present, but became more visible due to loss of jobs in all walks of life, more in the first two (April & May) months of complete shut-down. The panic was visible. The summer heat made the destitute on the street make choices refusing food and asking for the water. For them free water supplying hotels were shut while many kept distance due to fear of getting the virus. Equipped with more water bottles, bananas and lunch boxes volunteers often regrouped with consistency. So that their effort is welcomed and no one wastes the food. Volunteers kept taking feedback on the quality of food which was delivered, so that a deeper sense of care and trust was built. It works well today.

Homeless, daily wage and migrant workers still constitute a big number along with the old and young destitute, even after 6 months. The slum dwellers have resumed their small jobs since June, when the honourable government introduced unlocking Covid-19 policies.

Support came from all corners, for example, an organisation came forward to support over 200 widows, who were able to receive Rs 1000/- directly credited to their bank accounts. These widows were the only breadwinners in their family and had lost their jobs as an immediate lockdown result. From the novel idea of distributing storybooks & grocery-kits to slum children, grocery-kits for the poor and widows, clothes and toiletries distribution for destitute: many organisations still carry out their support for the needy.

One project tries to rehabilitate mothers who lost their jobs by giving temporary jobs to cook food and distribute to the destitute and poor in their vicinity. So, they do not lose their rented homes and end up with their children on the street. Once they resume their old jobs, they are free to stop the temporary job. In a day, a mother can cook and deliver 100 snack boxes under the Feeding project. Free haircuts, beard dressing and shaving for destitute men who come to pick up breakfast and lunch boxes are given occasionally also by some volunteers.

Covid 19 challenges and responses in Tribal areas

“India lives in its villages.” Mahatma Gandhi, Father of Nation.

Murbad Taluk located 110 km away from Mumbai with its majestic landscapes and hilly areas nestle many hamlets to its 2 to 2.5 lakhs of population and majority are tribal population. The taluk has 206 Gram panchayats. Higher employment for its educated class is a complex task, hence the majority (educated or not) get involved in the primary occupation of agriculture. Most tribal villagers are agricultural labourers and marginal daily wage workers and go out to the nearest village centre only for extreme medical needs or emergencies, festival or ceremony related shopping once in a while. Few of them attend the weekly Bazaar where the agricultural produce is sold locally and the remaining bulk products are sold to the wholesale agents who provide them with basic farming requirements of seed, manure etc.

Food scarcity in the community often compels them to search the nearby forest land for food. The forest offers a lot of berries and fruits. Villagers at Malshej Ghat have been facing continuous leopard attacks during monsoons. With Covid 19 lockdown and monsoon hitting heavily on the population, volunteers reached out to a village with some grocery-kits for very poor families and widows. The distribution followed in other villages too on request. Soon other village heads came forward to request the grocery-kits for the poor in the villages. A meeting was held where the village sarpanch or assistant agreed to have better coordination. With many good-hearted city individuals coming forward to support the grocery-kit distribution, volunteers were able to provide grocery kits in 900 poor families in the nearby villages nestled in Malshej Ghat. Villages such as Dehare, Madh, Sonavale, Singapur, Madhas, Fangloshi, Eklahare, Karchonde, Tokawade, Kalambad and Sachole benefited from the grocery-kit distribution, totalling 900 families.

Pregnant tribal mothers who often seemed malnourished were provided a full baby-kit to compensate the financial loss in the family due to Covid-19 pandemic, which can affect the well-being of the new born. Most children are born as malnourished; hence the baby-kit distribution was carried out at the

local primary health centre under doctor's supervision. Medical gloves, sanitisers, Dettol bottles, masks were distributed in the villages to make sure the villagers felt cared for and protected. Widows who can sew are given mask-making jobs so that they also earn from their work.

Though the online school system is widely used and useful for children in cities, towns and village central areas etc., the hilly areas often had network issues and the online classes did not pick momentum in hilly areas. A novel idea is promoted in the village to have its own study circles under the 'One Village, One Teacher' programme. Volunteers aim to recruit a local teacher from the village so that children can revise their lessons and focus their learning. The impacts of Covid 19 have made children feel the loss of quality time at school, and most of them want schools to reopen, but have no idea when the schools are going to resume. Currently two villages have come forward to experiment with this novel idea and volunteers have great hope that this will inspire more villages to implement 'One Village, One Teacher' for their own children.

Covid-19 impact on school system for marginalised

"Much of the current research on educational psychology reflects the idea that the child, adult and the context surrounding an event are responsible for forwarding cognitive activity and building competence." (Educational Psychology 2003)

Schools where children from financially and socially backward families study face a big threat due to Covid-19 pandemic, as the majority of the schools have gone online to conduct classes as per the government advisories. It is not a hard task for schools in the city to go online since the city has the best telecommunication infrastructure, and mobile-data signals are available even in the inner or deep slum pockets. But many families from low income strata do not even have the latest android phone where school apps can work. Old smart phones do not support the new apps and many families have only one smartphone for many siblings. Average ratio in a slum family is one smartphone for 4 students. In most

circumstances, the eldest child gets the opportunity to learn on the phone, while the remaining children miss their online classes.

One school purchased 30 cheapest new mobile phones which support the new educational apps and handed them over to parents, so that children who are struggling can attend online classes. As per the Head Teacher of the said school, this initiative was an eyeopener. Many families had one smartphone and many siblings, hence the eldest was lucky to attend the class while younger ones missed. Many had old phones which do not support the new apps. Many, as expected, never had a smartphone and were using an ordinary phone. Very few already had a smartphone. With this initiative, 60% of students were able to join the online classes. The remaining 40% had been unreachable since their mobile phones got switched off. The Headmistress or the school staff made home visits to locate families so that the students can attend the online classes. When the team located a few families, they acknowledged that they do not own even a simple phone. They were struggling to make two ends meet since there was no income. Some students had migrated to the village for safety and now they have decided to come back to join the classes. The good sign of decrease in the daily Covid-19 infection in the month of October allowed the parents to bring children back to school.

Majority people share their insecurity that how the support is being reduced now after 6 months of pandemic effect and some support systems have completely stopped for the destitute: but they still enjoy the erratic good Samaritan support. They are happy that the people are breaking the Covid-19 rules and are out to celebrate or to shop something. They can beg or do rag pick to make some additional income which will help them to fight their own war against Covid-19.

