

# Migrant Labour and the Pandemic - Media Representation

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The national lockdown during the COVID-19 crisis has brought the constituency of migrant labour centre stage. It has unravelled the disconcerting reality about the vulnerability of this unorganised section of society. Valued as a core group during "normal" times, the crisis has revealed the inherent dichotomy emanating from their near total dispensability in "new normal" times. Thrown out of jobs, and without wages and savings; they became "outsiders" and a "threat" to the citizens and the administration in the now 'indifferent' or even 'hostile' host cities. Deemed to be the conscience keeper of society, the media has the power to draw the attention of the masses, law makers and administrators to compelling issues. Even in this context, the media highlighted the predicament of the migrants by bringing forth facts and narratives of hardships faced by them, as also accounts of their expectations from their employers, state, civil society and citizens. Within social work discourse, the potential of the media in creating an ethos of engagement with core issues of marginalisation has been largely undermined, and this paper attempts to shed light on this void. It aims to examine the role of media in bringing to the forefront the lived reality of the migrants traversing the COVID crisis in their own words and images, and within the diversity of perceptions and reactions of the "others", as they engaged with media representations.

**Key words:** *migrants, labour, vulnerability, media, COVID crisis*

## Introduction

The global crisis emanating from the Novel Corona Virus (COVID-19) has been humongous and most unprecedented. Never before has the world witnessed a pandemic of such monumental proportions or one that has been as perilous as the present one. In response to the crisis, and enhancing fears about the exponential spread of the deadly virus, India imposed a three-week national lockdown in the third week of March, 2020. Deemed necessary in the backdrop of a huge population of almost 1.3 billion being at risk, the lockdown period was



expected to slow down the spread of the virus, and also give time to the government to consolidate the health infrastructure.

However, amongst the distinct challenges which stemmed from this complete closure of social and economic life was the one which pertained to the migrant population. It assumed the dimensions of a gigantic humanitarian crisis which unfolded across India as scores of persons belonging to the unorganised labour force who found themselves in the midst of complete desolation. With curtailed means of livelihood, they faced starvation, destitution and distress. Fear of disease, despondency and uncertainty about the future, and frenzy, due to unabated rumours floating that the lockdown was to be extended further, led to their desperation to flee the cities and towns where they had once come to actualise their dreams.

In the days that followed the announcement of the lockdown, India witnessed a walking exodus of thousands of people trying to reach home. Many were stranded on state borders, without money and rations. The lockdown-induced migration has indeed left a debilitating impact on this floating population.

### **Migrant Labour: Significant yet Invisible**

Migrant labour has been playing a distinct role in the country's labour market and economic development. However their existence is under acknowledged, as they remain excluded from most of the policy and programme initiatives (Singh, 2020).

As per the 2011 Census, <sup>1</sup> the total number of internal migrants in India is as high as 45.36 crores or 37% of the country's population. Bhagat (2014) highlighted the role of economic reforms in bringing about an increase in the rate of migration in urban areas after 1991–1993. Quoting the NSS data for the year 2000, he estimated that about 35 per cent of India's urban population comprised of migrants. Drawing data from the National Sample Survey (NSS) in 2007-08, the Working Group on Migration, 2017, revealed that about 28.3% of the Indian workforce comprised of migrants. The Economic Survey 2017 highlighted an acceleration in migration, as the annual rate of growth of labour migrants nearly doubled, rising to 4.5 per cent per annum in 2001-11 from 2.4 per cent in 1991- 2001 (p. 265).

In terms of profile, the migrants display a wide diversity in terms of caste, religion, age, family composition, education and other variables. On the basis of micro surveys, Abbas and Verma (2014) acknowledged that most migrants fall in the age group of 16 and 40 years; and are semi-permanent and temporary migrants, with their stay varying between 60 days and one year. The Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes (the two constituencies which have been provided with

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<sup>1</sup>India has a decadal Census, the last one was undertaken in the year 2011



positive affirmation by India's Constitution) comprise a significant proportion in short-term migration flows.

Both 'Pull' and 'Push' factors determine migration in the country. The primary push factors include poverty; unemployment in rural belts; persistent underdevelopment and lack of opportunities for human development; decimation of natural resource base; and disasters and natural calamities (Attri and Tyagi, 2010). The aggravating agricultural crisis and agrarian distress have also emerged as important push factors, together with increasing destitution of the original dwellers due to acquisition of their productive assets for the location of development projects. Significant pull factors subsume an increasing demand for labour in urban areas; better job opportunities; rural-urban wage differentials; and better medical and educational facilities in urban conglomerations (Kundu and Saraswati, 2012).

The migrants face a diversity of issues and challenges at their destinations. Their multifaceted vulnerability emanates from livelihood insecurity, alienation due to the unfamiliar socio-cultural environment, inadequate housing and lack of formal residency rights; low-paid, insecure or hazardous work; lack of political representation and the resultant diminished control over resources (Babu et al., 2017). Confined to overcrowded and appalling living conditions, lack of safe drinking water, abysmal sanitation, lack of basic amenities, they are rendered most vulnerable. The attendant prevalence of crime, insecurity for women, sexual abuse and exposure to frequent morbidity and epidemics further add to their plight (Bala, 2017). They are often accorded a lower legal status and curtailed citizenship rights, primarily due to their "floating" migrant status. With constricted access to identity documentation, social entitlements, housing, and financial services, they remain precariously perched in the lowermost echelons of the urban society.

The economic gains of migration and the significance of migrants remain largely unacknowledged, with migration being perceived as an economically, socially and politically destabilising process, which places unnecessary burden on urban areas. It is deemed to not only facilitate labour exploitation by the informal sector; but also cause administrative and legislative strain (Bird and Deshingker, 2009). The responses of the state to India's significant internal migration have remained limited. Governments remain unresponsive to them and employers routinely ignore and discount the laws which protect their rights and needs (Deshingkar, 2005).

The mass exodus of migrants due to COVID-19 was deemed to be the second largest mass migration in the country's history after the Partition of India (Mukhra et al, 2020). The extent of this sudden reverse migration was such, that even the best efforts of the government could not match the crisis (ibid). The authorities did organise shelters, food, rations and quarantine homes for the destitute migrants. Still millions of migrants were unable to receive aid by the Government (Pandey, 2020 quoted by Mukhra et al, 2020). Elucidating the impact of lockdown



on the migrant workforce, Sengupta and Jha (2020) underscored the initial government response in preventing migrant movement which emanated from the fear that they would carry the deadly virus to their home destinations. Much has been written on the role of the pandemic communication in leading to hate and stigma, especially via social media (Sengupta, 2020; UN News, 2020). This highlighted another discernible problem of 'gatedness' and 'stigmatisation' that was experienced by the migrants. Community surveillance assumed the mantle of vigilantism and violence (Agrawal, 2020), thereby compounding the psycho-social challenges of the migrants.

It was here that media of different hues, including print, broadcast, digital and social media sprung in, and assumed the role of a noteworthy conduit, through which stories of the ongoing struggle and anguish of the underprivileged was brought up front and centre stage. By reporting with significant coverage and thrust, it highlighted the stories and narratives of the migrants. In the process, it facilitated the visibilisation of the hitherto invisible and much "abandoned" demographic.

### **Media and its Role**

Media plays an important role in society, not only because of its outreach, but also on account of its ability to set a purposeful and contextual agenda. While the significance of the print media is well established, social media has begun to significantly permeate the discourse, both global and local. The biggest advantage of social media is that it transcends geographical boundaries; surpasses socio-cultural and demographic barriers and allows for the widespread dissemination of information. It also creates organic content, which allows a diversity of people to express their opinions, views and perspectives.

Media assumes an important role in the social construction of problems, making them subjects of concerted debates, and thereby creating opportunities for requisite policy change (William Hoynes, 2018; Hubbard et al 1975, Kellener, n.d.). Quoting Sainath, Fernandes (2008) iterates that the press has potential to initiate change as governments often refrain from ignoring their stories. The erstwhile Chairman of the Press Council of India, Mr. G.K. Ray also highlighted media's contribution in shaping public opinion and setting the agenda on social, political, economic and cultural fronts. He asserted the need for media to ensure that issues pertaining to human rights remain in focus (Ray, 2007). Happer and Philo (2013) also acknowledge the role of media in setting a purposeful agenda by selecting issues that should come to the public domain. But for the media, many such issues would remain beyond the purview of attention and discussion. They however caution that while media messages can be catalysts for change, they may also help maintain the hegemony of the powerful by either providing legitimacy to their actions or by not letting alternate discourses reach centre stage. By repetition and reinforcement of messages, media facilitates a particular action, thus providing it legitimacy, and creating doubt and confusion over others (ibid).



While there is an expectation that the print media would keep a watch on the activities and policies of the governments of the day (Rodrigues, 2010), there has also been a criticism of the print media for its reluctance to highlight the causes of vulnerable sections, and for being anti-poor in its larger discourse (Fernandes, 2008). The corporatisation of media has come to determine and define the issues which become the headlines. Further, "the qualities of immediacy and drama required of news stories inevitably slant the selection of stories towards the more sensational" (Ayre, 2001, p. 889). Consequently, the plight of the vulnerable sections, especially as it prevails in the neo-liberal context often fails to become a part of public discourse (Fernandes, 2008). In this sense, far from emerging as the fourth pillar of democracy, the media confines itself to being a content provider.

McQuail (2005) highlighted the normative expectations from media in public interest, wherein respect for human rights; and avoidance of harm to individuals and society has been acclaimed. When media highlights persistent social problems and the violations that accrue in society, it leads to the emergence of a viable public opinion, which can be marshalled by the social work profession to usher social change. The agenda of the media and social work therefore coalesce together (Franklin and Parton, 1991) auguring immense scope for cooperative engagement, which stems from their common perspective that is guided by human rights and social justice. Stanfield and Beddoe (2013) also expressed the need for inter-professional education to help media and social work to come together for fostering social justice and democracy.

## **Methodology**

The paper is based on secondary data gathered from print and social media. An in-depth review of two daily newspapers was done for understanding the nature and extent of coverage on issues of the migrant labour during the lockdown period in India. The newspapers, one in English and other in Hindi were selected due to their wide circulation and outreach among distinct sets of readers. Moreover, they seemed more neutral by way of abstaining from demonstrating any overt ideological positioning.

All coverage pertaining to the migrant crisis which appeared in the 122 editions of the two newspapers was identified, classified and analysed to reveal the generic trends in coverage and focus. This included a total of 386 news items in the English newspaper and 203 items in the Hindi newspaper. This was followed by the selection of a ten per cent sample from each daily, based on distinct categories which included: nature of news; coverage on different pages; and stakeholders' perspectives, with due representation to editorials, special features and letters to editor. As many as 38 and 20 news items were purposively selected for in-depth analysis from the two newspapers.

The data for analysis of social media coverage on migrant labour was taken from the handles of e-news channels, Instagram and Twitter. Coverage by social media news channels and the



perception of activists, politicians, academicians, other well-known personalities and ordinary people represented on and through Instagram and Twitter was also analyzed. Snowball sampling was used for data collection as tweets posted by well-known personalities in the social realm were accessed. From their posts and comments, connect was established with others who were re-tweeting and giving their opinions. About 300 tweets and re-tweets on twitter, and 1000 news pieces including stories, interviews and videos on migrant labour were analyzed.

### **Extent and Nature of Coverage in English Newspaper**

The English newspaper that was selected is one of the most widely read English newspapers in the country. After a broad analysis of the extent and nature of coverage on the themes under consideration was undertaken within 61 editions of the newspaper which appeared during the lockdown period, a detailed analysis of 38 articles/news items was accomplished.

The significance of the crisis and its coverage by the English media was exemplified by the huge number of news items that appeared, and this was almost double the coverage by the Hindi newspaper. As many as 386 articles (with an average of 13 articles per day) appeared on themes around the migrants. Further, 77 items featured on the first and second pages, often as headlines, and another 28 articles appeared on the third page, suitably depicting the importance attributed to this subject. The editorial and expert sections on the centre pages also featured migrants' related analysis and perspectives in 50 items. The number of features on the other pages accounted for a significant number of 231, bespeaking the overall visibility of migrants and their issues. As far as content of the articles was concerned, 143 items highlighted the diverse issues confronted by the migrant workers during lockdown; 94 items focused on the nuances of the state and judiciary response towards their situation; and 63 articles presented a critique of the state response towards the critical issues being experienced by the migrants. While 271 items were focused on state specific coverage, those presenting the national perspective were 111. Three articles followed satirical or sardonic language. As many as 182 articles were accompanied with pictorial depictions including photographs, graphics, tables and cartoons to illustrate the content, thereby provisioning a better visual connect to the reader.

As far as the 38 articles selected for detailed analysis were concerned, as many as 15 articles depicted the issues and experiences of the migrants; 6 of them focussed on the perspectives of experts; and 14 articles covered state and industry response, and the role of judiciary. While 27 articles were descriptive, and primarily focused on reporting facts and incidents; 7 articles presented a critique of government policy, guidelines and action; and 3 articles focused on recommendations to rectify the ground situation. A significant majority of 24 articles were substantiated with pictures. Pictures depicting the vulnerability and trauma of the migrants and their families either accompanied the articles or were inserted on different pages for additional visual impact. These communicated the reality of the situation more eloquently than the text.



Out of 38 articles, 23 articles used certain adjectives to depict the situation of the migrants. These included descriptions like *stranded, distressed, hungry, angry, impoverished, poor, anxious, and fearful* among others. The choice of adjectives reinforced the sense of victimhood of the migrants, and their need for help and largesse. They also added to the overall impact and tended to sensationalize the story at hand. Articles portraying the image of the migrants as a group with agency, demanding their rights as citizens were sparse.

The analysis of the microcosm exemplified the seriousness of the issues of the migrants through front page coverage in 12 items. With bold headlines and large and impactful photographs, the medium undertook extensive coverage on the plight of the migrants as they fared during the crisis. Photo features series figured in many editions providing a telling account of their situation. Several front-page news items spelled out their sense of deprivation, despondency, hopelessness, anxiety, resentment and even anger. In many ways the media made the "hitherto paradoxical invisibility" of migrants, and their contemporaneous "hyper-visibility on the highway" apparent. There was significant coverage of contingent episodes, as they transpired, magnifying the extreme vulnerability of the homeless migrants. Reports elaborating tragic and traumatic instances of emergencies, suicides and deaths of migrants who were unable to cope with the extreme hardships were brought to fore.

Coverage on migrants was largely based on the accounts by the migrants themselves. Painful experiences about job losses; non-payment of wages; shortage of food and potable drinking water at shelters; depletion of cash; difficulty in procuring passes and medical examination for travel; altercations with police; challenging treks; lack of masks, gloves or even soap; anxiety about families back at home and the glaring uncertainty about future figured as core issues expressed by them in several news items. The initial problems faced by migrants upon return home also found coverage, and these included pressure on village quarantine centres; and lack of employment avenues, leading to pressures on them to reverse the trend and return back to the unsafe and unfriendly destinations once over.

A noteworthy issue that grabbed national attention during the crisis was the circulation of fake or unauthenticated news by some forms of media, which led to fear and frenzy in different parts of the country. The interjection of the Supreme Court to direct the print, electronic and social media to maintain "a strong sense of responsibility and ensure that unverified news capable of causing panic is not disseminated" underscored the importance of a fair and responsible media in partaking its role as an agent of social change and transformation. It reflected the impactful role that media is expected to play in periods of contingency, and the need for social accountability. Focus on the tussle between state governments in externalising responsibility to the emergent crisis also drove home the inadequacy of clear-cut policy responses to contingencies, especially as they interfaced with the marginalised.



The overall contribution of the migrant labour to the economy was highlighted, but only sparsely. An article titled *"Perhaps the exodus will spotlight migrants' key role in cities' functioning"* highlighted the economic contributions made by informal employment sector and the valued presence of circular migrants in the urban economy. Despite the fact that many of these are core to the economy and contribute a significant share in the national GDP, the author acknowledged the broad societal reluctance to acknowledge the contribution of circular migrants. Only one article addressing the multiple disadvantages that women face as poor and informal workers, despite their notable contribution to the work economy was located.

The pre-existing vulnerabilities of the migrants were also captured in a section of articles. In a centre page expert feature, the ongoing migrants' crisis was attributed to their deeply entrenched vulnerability in the pre-crisis context. Citing examples from the past, the author highlighted the deprivation, discrimination and even intolerance meted out to the migrants of diverse backgrounds in different locales. Iterating that the current crisis was reflective of the fragile position occupied by migrants in society, the author considered it unfair to entirely blame the government for it. The author summarises by saying: *"Despite the high level of dependency on these very workers, first we disenfranchise them from coming into our cities and towns. And then, in times of crisis, we do not let them return home....And we, as a society, will continue to not care"*. Another one titled *"The fortune of others"* also reiterated the "critical vulnerabilities of Indian society that the COVID-19 pandemic had exposed, and which were *"laid bare by the humanitarian crisis that unfolded as the nation-wide lockdown took effect"*. The author urged society *"to regain moral compass, address plight of people in cities whose precarious livelihoods keep them steps away from destitution"*. The disproportionate burden of the crisis on the poor and the marginalised was alluded to in several articles, as also the striking "irony in the asymmetry" between the privileged and the marginalised groups. While the rich were responsible for bringing in the virus from abroad, it was the poor who carried the curse of the burden of the pandemic.

The apathy of city dwellers to the persistent anguish of the migrants was also reflected. Articles seeking an emotional connect of the readers were exemplified by stories which depicted the injustice meted to the migrants who were banished from the physical and mental frames of the urbanites, and the "paranoia, cold heartedness and middle-class smugness" that unfolded. Later coverage depicted how migrants were often construed as carriers for community transmission. The depiction of the dichotomous concerns of the migrants, who desired a safe journey home, and the state governments, who wished to scrupulously arrest the spread of infection within their territories, even by going to the extent of barricading their own natives out, personified the larger image of the migrants being 'nowhere people'.

The media provided adequate coverage to state response, as it evolved over time. Focus on the need for psychological counselling through trained counsellors and engagement of community leaders to deal with the pressing issues of the migrants; provision of relief through existing





schemes; appeals to reassure the migrants to stay back; and advice to states to adhere to the Supreme Court mandated directions for responding to the physical, medical and psychological needs of the migrants was manifest. The important role played by the judiciary was also evidenced as it stepped in to provide guidelines and reprieve. Whether it was its dismay at the plight of the migrants and emphasis on their extreme vulnerability; or directives that host states be accountable for their safety and well-being; the judiciary participated in proffering succour to the migrants. It was noteworthy that the National Human Rights Commission cited the contents of media reports to highlight human rights violations of migrant families which suffered irrevocable loss, and the failure of the state to protect the lives of the poor labourers on board the trains.

The media also uncovered the pressures of the state governments, both of the host states and home states, where the workers were headed. Fearing labour scarcity, the worry of state governments and industry not to let migrants go back depicted the perceived economic value of migrants within the prevailing insensitivity towards their basic needs and expectations. The coverage reflected the underlying perceptions of the host states which found manifestation in the demonstration of minimal accountability for the wellbeing of the "outsider" migrants. Stories of fortitude by migrants resorting to walking or cycling huge distances were also presented, which reflected their sense of desperation, coupled with resilience and fortitude. Reassuring stories of compassion and foresight for migrant well-being were also reported. To illustrate, a front-page article titled "*Doing good to do well: Holding on to migrant labour workforce*", shed light on some good practices.

### **Extent and Nature of Coverage in Hindi Newspaper**

The Hindi newspaper which has been analysed is one of the largest circulated Hindi newspapers in India, with circulation largely concentrated in the Northern and Western parts of the country. An analysis of the 203 news items and editorials published over 61 days was undertaken to decode the coverage on the migrant crisis.

Of the 203 news items analysed, news on migrant workers appeared as headlines on the first two pages on 22 occasions; on the third page 17 times; and in 142 items on remaining pages. With 22 editorials being written on the subject, there were 61 occasions when news on migrant labour emerged as core focus. The headlines used direct or satirical style to convey the thrust of coverage and almost 70 percent of the news items were accompanied with pictorial depictions of workers in diverse and difficult frames. While 80 per cent of the articles and editorials were state specific, the remaining news provided a national perspective. Three fourths of the items focussed on government response to the workers' situation and its critique. It is noteworthy that minimal news coverage was accorded to the role or obligation of employers and civil society organisations. Only one news item covered the former and the latter received coverage in two news items. The multiple difficulties faced by the "helpless" migrants

during the debilitating lockdown were conveyed in 29 per cent articles. As few as 5 news items acknowledged the contribution of the migrant workers to the economy in an indirect context. A total of 20 news items were analysed in detail to acquire an in-depth understanding of the discourse being constructed through these news items. As many as 14 news items were factual and direct; 4 were recommendatory in nature; and 6 of them brought forth the position of the government on the migrant labour. In 7 articles adjectives such as *helpless*, *worried* and *stuck* were used to characterise the migrants. While 12 news items shared the stories from the perspective of the migrants, only 5 of them took a clear position or made an analysis of the situation unfolding from the crisis. The overall analysis shows that the news stories were mostly direct and factual in communicating the issues and challenges of the migrant labour. They were often from the perspective of the migrants, depicting narratives of hunger, pain, suffering and humiliation being faced by them, rather than stories focusing on their resilience, perseverance, rights, dignity and worth. The selective adjectives used to describe the workers' situation was aimed at generating sympathy for them. However this usage not only tended to compromise the inherent dignity and capacity of this group, it also seemed to undermine their own capacities for mobilisation and self-help. Often, the stories were accompanied with pictures of the workers traversing journeys across different geographical and social frames. The strategic use of pictorial depictions of the plight of the workers reinforced the content and enabled the 'perceptive' among the readers to develop an empathetic connect with the migrants.

Ranging from agriculture related challenges, debt trap, farmer's suicide to lack of decent wages and institutional apathy, the news items covered a diversity of hardships contributing to existential problems in native contexts. There was one news item which used a satirical tone to discuss the context in which sixteen migrant workers lost their lives while sleeping on the railway tracks. While the news item was found to be starkly telling in terms of the 'insignificant' value associated with the lives of this vulnerable constituency, it was also paradoxical; in that it laid bare the harsh reality of the migrants' life, of being run over by a train, which was ironically not made available to them while they were alive, but which became instrumental in their tragic death. The announcement of a state compensation of Rs 5 lacs was sardonically referred to as a "severance package", reflecting the lack of social and economic security for these informal workers. The tone and content of the words used to describe the immensely tragic death of migrants was a castigation of the prevailing apathy towards their mental and physical agony.

There were reports of workers being suspected carriers of the corona virus, which inadvertently contributed to their stigmatisation. In sensationalising a news item about a government analysis that three out of the ten migrants could be suspected corona cases, the media may have contributed towards building fear and resentment towards the migrants returning home. In fact, one news item confirmed this apprehension when it reported that the return of the migrants had increased fear amongst villagers. In contrast, no news item could be located which allayed this fear of people or which questioned the labelling of migrant workers as carriers of this disease.



The response of the state and central governments received adequate coverage. Discourse around the government was built through reporting of the government interventions; as also critiquing them and giving recommendations. Recommendations included airlifting migrants; guaranteeing food and shelter; linking migrant labour with existing livelihood schemes; and need for critical reflection on the action and response taken by the government. These added to the overall discourse for enhanced and timely state intervention. The engagement of the government with institutions such as the judiciary also received coverage. For instance, there was a news item about the government's submission before the Supreme Court with regard to the parameters of migrant exodus. Even though news articles reporting government's actions and plans appeared, they did not often cover the extent of outreach and actual benefits availed. Some news items also underscored the relations between the centre and states within the federal structure of the country, and which permeated the migrant crisis. For instance, one article reflected the politics between the two entities over the return of the migrants.

Select news items portrayed an in depth analysis of the crisis, its reasons and ramifications. These included a reflection on the fallout of the crisis on the governments in power, its long-term impact on the future voting patterns and the dilemma of the state governments to keep the migrant workers enlisted as vote banks, and the connect between the state of the migrant workers with failures on economic and social fronts, and lack of adequate willpower to change the situation. The regional coverage of migrants' hardships highlighted the need to strengthen communication and coordination amongst governments at the states and at the centre. A few items acknowledged the contribution of migrant labour force in different segments of the economy, but the attempt to build a discourse around this aspect was inadequate. Reports highlighting judicial intervention in the ongoing crisis also appeared. Using candid language, these elaborated the courts' expectations from the government towards making adequate arrangements for the physical and mental wellbeing of the migrant workers. There was reflection the fact that courts were holding the governments accountable for steps to alleviate the distress of this section of society.

As in the English media, much of news coverage was confined to a narration of issues, challenges and expectations of the migrants, depicted from the perspective of the journalist or stemming from accounts of the migrants and their families. There was not enough focus on the structural and systemic constraints that denied migrants access to rights and entitlements as equal citizens. It would not be fallacious to say that the focal thrust of the coverage was mostly factual and anecdotal.

### **Migrant Workers on Social Media**

The nature of content generated by the social media on the migrant workers and their plight during the lockdown was also analysed based on the premise that social media plays a distinct role in facilitating the *netizens* to create their own content; share it with a larger audience and

help create opinions. Content generation on social media being an ongoing activity, the possibility of building a discourse on an issue or theme is enhanced. All e-news channels and several activists and noted personalities gave their views on the migrant crisis, as did common people.

The analysis shows that social media users were fairly active on the issue of migrant workers right from the beginning of the crisis. They started reporting on them from the end of March, 2020, when thousands of stranded migrant workers assembled at a railway station in Delhi to catch trains to their home states. The issues which got highlighted largely pertained to the situation of the migrants in metropolitan cities and the impact of lockdown on their livelihood and living. It widely featured their stressful journeys back home, as they struggled to access transportation, food and shelter; their opinion on the quarantine centres where they were sent; and other existential challenges. For instance, one user shared the anguish of a migrant, when the latter lamented that "if he did not die of virus, he would surely die of hunger" and another shared the migrants' insecurity emanating from the absence of care givers in the eventuality of their falling ill. Other posts reflected migrants' anxiety due to job losses; absence of social services; lack of portability of state-provisioned benefits, including rations provided through the public distribution system; difficulties in accessing shelters; and poor implementation of minimum safety standards in quarantine centres. Some migrants waiting to leave for their homes mentioned to a leading e-medium that "*they had no choice but to return to their homes, even if they risked passing the virus on to their village.*" There were also multiple stories of police high handedness, citizen apathy and unfulfilled expectations from the government, reflecting the deep trust deficit that migrants were experiencing.

The analysis also highlighted an ample number of posts featuring views, opinions and perspectives of government handling of migrant crisis. While a section of the posts lauded the efforts of the government in providing relief to the migrants, many others critically analysed the policies and guidelines imposed by the states to contain the movement of the migrants. There were posts iterating the misery that the unplanned lockdown had brought in the lives of the working class. For instance, one post shared that "*Millions of migrant workers have lost their livelihoods, income security, and sense of dignity in three short weeks. For them, the cure of an extended lockdown is already worse than the disease.*" Posts by activists decried the government for precipitating a situation which forced the migrants to walk long distances to reach home, when in comparable situations, Indian citizens stranded abroad were brought back through special flights. The posts also took a dig at the mainstream media, which in its bid to sensationalise, ended up making a mockery of the misery of the migrants. There were posts which also shared expectations from the judiciary to alleviate the suffering of the migrants. In fact, the activists and public joined a twitter storm for two hours on May 29<sup>th</sup> with hashtag #Workerslivesmatter demanding implementation of Supreme Court order on the migrant worker crisis, thereby requisitioning justice for migrant workers.



Social media posts by the opposition political parties in support of the migrant labour and against the government's position on the crisis also did active rounds. While some posts lamented the absence of planning by the government before announcing the lockdown, others underscored an overall lack of concern for the poor and vulnerable. Posts by some political parties, youth organisations other citizens according support to the government's decision to impose lockdown to fight the pandemic were also significant. Similarly, academicians and ordinary citizens did share and re-tweet comments of political parties and activists, thus engaging a larger audience on the issue of the migrant crisis.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

That the media plays an extremely vital role in highlighting the issues permeating society, and consequently generating discussions, debates and public discourses on the diverse nuances of the same is incontestable. Considered as the fourth pillar of democracy, it is expected to disseminate credible and unbiased information and views on the ongoing and critical socio-economic and political issues transpiring within the local, national and global contexts. In this, it proffers vast scope for widening mindsets, altering attitudes, and fostering change and transformation through informed citizen engagement.

The media played an instrumental role during the lockdown impacted migrant labour crisis in the country. First and foremost, it made this hitherto invisible constituency visible, as it brought widespread awareness about its overwhelming presence and contribution to the lives of the urban dwellers. By highlighting the issues and challenges of this marginalised constituency, it underscored its compounded vulnerability during emergent times. Both the English and Hindi newspapers gave considerable coverage to migrant labour and their plight, thus building a perspective and a discourse among citizens. The coverage by the English medium was distinctly more in volume, range and depth of coverage. Perhaps this had something to do with the differential readership base of the two newspapers. Nonetheless, it did not discount the fact that the vernacular daily did give wide coverage, and ensured that the public was made aware of their contingent situation. Indeed, it took a crisis to bring the pathos of the migrants to the attention of the urban dwellers, who had ignored their existence for so long.

In the overall analysis, both newspapers were more reliant on news journalism than on review journalism in their coverage of the subject, in that the main intent was to bring the occurrence of the events to the attention of the readers. The English newspaper covered some depth through feature stories and editorials, which provided scope for analysis and interpretation of events and issues at hand. Features by experts offered some hitherto less known and new perspectives about the migrants and their context. The vernacular newspaper, on the other hand, communicated facts and information in a more straightforward manner. There was greater reliance on use of colloquial language in the content and headlines of the vernacular medium,



unlike the English daily, which was more straightforward in the setting of headlines and themes of coverage.

By drawing attention to the entrenched vulnerability of the migrant labour, the media attempted to mobilize the state, civil society and citizens to shed their apathy towards this hitherto forsaken constituency. In its characteristic style, it portrayed the poignancy of the context by conjuring images of the migrants as they traversed the lockdown phase. It successfully built a narrative of their anguish and rejection through the stories of the migrants themselves. This incessant reporting compelled the diverse stakeholders to play some mandated roles. It stimulated discussion on several fronts, including the government, employers, workers and employers' associations, activists, academia, policy makers, implementing bodies, and even common citizens. The success of this narrative can be envisaged from the fact that most state governments and the central government came under pressure to intervene. Consequently, many initiatives were announced, be it running of special trains and buses; provision of ration and shelter; and linkages with government schemes. Many members of the civil society went knocking on the doors of the courts to seek directions to prompt the government to proffer humane and empathetic interventions. The voluntary sector also assumed lead in providing relief, alongside a number of religious and non-religious institutions. Even the Supreme Court took *suo moto* cognisance of newspaper reports on the plight of the workers and directed the governments to provide transport, food and shelter free of cost to the workers. Thus, the media's engagement with the migrant workers' crisis secured several desirable results.

However, in the larger context, the mainstream print media reinstated the image of migrant workers as hapless "victims" of circumstances, who needed assistance in contingent times. Both the newspapers tapped the sentimental impulses of readers. There was significant thrust on "moving" narratives, stories and pictures to tilt the orientation and mindset of the reader towards the victimhood of the migrants rather than on their resilience and agency. Both relied on accounts by the migrants themselves to circulate a personal depiction of their feelings of distress and anguish, their grievances and unmet expectations. Both also provided extensive coverage to traumatic instances of accidents and deaths of migrants to emotionally involve the readers in the migrants' ongoing journeys across spatial and temporal frames.

In the portrayal of migrant workers, the media provisioned a greater emphasis on their "migrant" status than on their identity of being "workers". It is an indisputable fact that the status of being a "migrant" does contribute towards the 'diffused identity' of the workers, thereby curtailing the rights that they would have normally accessed on account of their being citizens of the country. But in overtly projecting a victimised persona of the migrant workers, the media undermined the 'rights' orientation that should have been the overriding focus, instead of the 'welfarist' perspective that largely got permeated. The newspapers did report on petitions being moved in the courts to alleviate the sufferings of migrants. However, attempts to link these petitions with the constitutional rights of the migrant labour were lacking. For



instance, the Constitution of India guarantees certain rights to its citizens under Article 14 (the state shall not deny any person equality before law) and Article 21 (protection of life and liberty). But, the media failed to generate a public discussion on the imperatives of the link between the request for judicial intervention; the duty of the state; and the rights of citizens. It was a matter of their rights as "citizens" and "workers" that a demand for safety and security was expected, and should have been provisioned. Clearly, while the discourse did manage to mobilise large numbers of people to initiate relief measures, this sentiment did not translate into a dialogue on the rights of the labour within the prevailing context. On this count, the agency of the migrant workers and their rights were relegated to the sidelines.

By giving limited emphasis to their status as “workers” or “labour”, the dailies avoided the revelation of the antagonistic relationship between capital and labour, which had added to challenging context in which the migrants found themselves. Not enough space was given to the interrogation of the role and responsibilities of the businesses in light of the lamentable situation in which the migrants found themselves. By attributing the plight of the migrant workers to the extraordinary pandemic crisis and the lockdown, the media shied away from locating responsibility where it really lay. The relinquishment of responsibility by the businesses and the political economy of the country was not covered with the due forthrightness that it deserved. Essentially it was due to this that the migrants felt abandoned and neglected and faced the multiple hardships that they did, as accountability for their plight was forsaken by one and all.

Even while giving importance to the “migrant” status, the media did not foster adequate consciousness about the socio- economic and political context of migration amongst the readers. This depicted a noticeable lack of focus on the structural roots of oppression and exploitation of the migrants which generated their vulnerability in the first place, and the legal and administrative lacunae that compounded them. There was limited discussion on the challenges arising out of distorted development which had created the context in which there was huge outward migration of labour from some states in search of livelihood, education and perhaps a better life. This failure of the media to build a critical narrative about migration and its role in the economy, and the role and status of prevailing policies and legislations was distinctly discernible. Hence, for many readers, the perpetuity of the deep-rooted challenges of migrants may have been sidelined or missed altogether.

The print media did not play a desirable role in contesting the prevailing notions and images of the migrants as "nowhere people", or as the "carriers" of the dreaded virus. The manner in which news about the migrants’ movement and spread of infection was circulated, it only added to the fear and threat perception of the general public. The stigmatisation of this group, both in host and home contexts added to their plight and outsider status. It even made their integration back home challenging. Thus, the *othering* of the migrant workforce inadvertently



happened even when the media was unfolding distress and heart wrenching stories on the anguish of the migrant workers and sensitising the people about them.

This was opportune moment for the media to have highlighted the immense contribution that the migrant workers made to the life of the average urban dweller, who is also the reader of these dailies. As households found it difficult to cope without domestic help, vegetable vendors, delivery personnel and other significant functionaries who help cities and towns to run efficiently, the media missed building another valuable discourse, that is, the discourse of the common person. By adding substance to the stories of common people and the challenges of their existence without their workers, the media could have furthered the clamour for their rightful place in society. In the ultimate analysis, their image as a valued workforce, which left their homes to contribute to the society and economy of their destinations was dissipated.

The media coverage projected the migrants as a homogenous category, both demographically and occupationally. In reality however, the migrants comprised people of different ages and genders, with each demographic facing divergent challenges. The hardships faced by women migrants differed from those faced by their male counterparts, but these failed to find distinct mention. Similarly, most of the times, it was not individual migrant workers who were moving, but entire families, comprising of children and elderly. The physical and psychological impact of this forced reverse migration on children, who trudged long distances with their parents, facing hostility, rejection, hunger and thirst on the way, was not given enough space. In a context where just one impactful photograph and video of a child sleeping on a suitcase being pulled by the mother while covering a distance of nearly 800 km on foot made national news, and compelled the National Human Rights Commission to seek an explanation from the authorities, a greater focus on children's trauma in the migration saga could have created wider scope for more purposeful action. It was unfortunate that the print media did not capitalise on this opportunity to stimulate citizen journalism on the subject or build a campaign on the vital subject of migrant crisis. The thrust remained confined to information dissemination and awareness building. The phenomenal emotional connect that had been garnered at the level of the citizens across the country could have been mobilised for more discursive outcomes and the resultant sensitivity of people towards the pathos of the migrants could have been directed towards meaningful action by the government, voluntary sector and the general public.

In contrast, the social media was more dynamic, vibrant and discursive about the subject and the ground reality of the migrants. It was more alive to the issues, as they unfolded across the canvas of the country. Being an interactive and unfettered medium, users could use its bandwidth to express a diversity of perspectives and opinions. A stream of messages and their bundling created forums for dialogue, discussion and concerted engagement. From dialogues build around holding the governments responsible and accountable for addressing the plight of the migrant workers to the disregard shown by the employers, the social media platforms articulated a more lively and organic debate. While at one level, they questioned and monitored





the moves of the government, they also build an alternate discourse wherein the government was lauded for its efforts to alleviate the suffering of the migrant workers. However, since this media is characterized by an excluding digital divide, it was limiting in terms of citizen participation.

Needless to state, the media has immense power and role in making issues "front and centre" (page) in public attention and discussion. At the same time, it also has the ability to push others to the "margins". While bringing the condition of the migrant labour post lockdown central to the discussion, it did well. However, by focusing more overwhelmingly on their plight, it did much less. It was desirable for it to have held on to the debate and provide opinion and reflection on the underlying parameters and long-term solutions to the conditions and contexts which make the labour of the country vulnerable. The role of the state and the private sector in the light of the changing socio-economic and legal context of the labour force; the contribution of informal workers to economy and society and the returns thereof; issues of unequal and inequitable growth; and distorted development which result in growth of cities at the cost of rural areas; together with short and long-term solutions to such challenges would have construed more determinate and sustainable media contribution to the subject at hand.

The analyses of the media coverage on the migrant labour crisis amply demonstrate a huge need and potential for complementariness and inter-professional collaboration of media and social work in order to bring change. Such a contribution would however warrant a greater engagement of social scientists and social workers 'with' and 'within' the media. The role of citizen journalists, who could be students and scholars working on diverse themes; association of experts on media panels and bodies; timely generation of quasi academic articles by academicians; and capacity building of journalists and reporters on core or selective theoretical dimensions of subjects covered by them become central to enhancing the contemporary role and contribution of the media. The initiation of short-term courses for media persons by schools of social work, as also encouragement to social work students and research scholars to participate in media platforms, either through employment or being on interactive forums, such as 'letters to the editor' and writing for invited features is mandated. Focus on campaigns and action through media advocacy is a realm that is relatively under explored by the social work fraternity. As the migrant crisis shows, if this had been mobilised in this context, it would have yielded significant desirable outcomes.

The authors are of the opinion that the large-scale mobilisation of the masses by media towards the cause of migrant labour certainly needs acknowledgement. The profession of social work, with its overarching mandate of working with the marginalised groups, with social justice and human rights-based perspectives needs greater interface with media. Advocacy and action can gain mammoth consolidation, if social workers make effective use of media, but with due cognition to being fair, objective and credible. The profession can contribute towards building a rights-based discourse in media representations of the vulnerable sections of society,



engaging citizens in real discourses. The role and the bandwidth of the media and the profession will both get enriched and enhanced with a conscious interface between these two *mover and shaker* domains.

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