Outcasted in Homeland: Media Spectacle of Internal Migrant Workers' Crisis During COVID-19 Pandemic in India

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Abstract

After the declaration of a nationwide lockdown in 2020 the government of India as a precautionary measure stopped all sorts of transportation to cope with the health crisis caused by COVID-19. An unprecedented situation of gross human rights violations emerged in different states of India as a huge number of migrant workers tried to return to their distant native places due to the sudden loss of livelihood, shelter and absence of an adequate support system. Since the colonial era migrant workers remain the most invisible section in the Indian societal milieu. Meanwhile, the sudden visibility of vulnerable migrant workers shaped the issue as a significant spectacle in Indian mainstream media. The article explains the historical pattern of internal migration since the ancient civilisation in India to identify the root of the social exclusion of migrant workers. Based on the notion of *spectacle* by Debord and Kellner, the article critiques the construction of the spectacles of the marginalised migrants' crisis in Indian mainstream media and how it reinforces capitalist values.

Keywords: *COVID-19 Pandemic, Internal Migrant Workers, Migrant's Long March, Reverse*

Migration, Media Spectacle, Invisibility

Introduction

Enormous epidemics and pandemics including Plague, Cholera, Smallpox, Influenza etc. affected the broader socioeconomic structure since the colonial rule in India. Indian historiography evidently reflects the intrinsic relation between the struggle of the working class and the health crisis. During the Plague epidemic in 1896-1897, a mass depletion of 4000,000 workers led to the labour shortage in the textile industry of Bombay. Significantly due to that epidemic of the 1890s, the workers gained bargaining capacity which left a major impact on long-term labour relations in India (Sen 144). In the contemporary era, the health crisis caused by COVID-19 immediately took the shape of a global humanitarian crisis. In the Indian scenario, the desperate exodus of migrant workers throughout the country elevated the depth of the crisis.

Due to the exponential growth of COVID-19, the Government of India took diverse precautionary measures to break the chain of infection. Finally, the prime minister declared nationwide complete lockdown from March 25, 2020. The announcement of the lockdown initiated 'a crisis within a crisis' in different parts of India as a huge number of internal migrant workers along with their families including children, women, and aged were trying to return to their hometowns due to the loss of livelihood (Vig 1). In lockdown when all the means of transportation were prohibited, migrant workers started to walk desperately to their homes hundreds or even thousands of kilometres away. The unprecedented issue uncovered the vulnerability of the unorganised labour force in India, which inevitably grabbed the attention of the fourth pillar of the state, the media. The acute crisis of internal migrants across India eventually turned the issue into a media spectacle. Kellner defined media spectacle as a form of media construction of contemporary issues "which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of

information, and that become popular stories which capture the attention of the media and the public" (Kellner, "Media Spectacle and" vii). This article delves into how Indian commercialised mainstream media constructed spectacles of the suffering of marginalised migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, using secondary data available in the existing literature. The article further elucidates the condition of migrant workers from a historical perspective to understand their notion of exclusion in the Indian socio-economic fabric.

Migrant Workers in India: A Historical Overview

The history of migration in India is nearly two thousand years old and primarily the root can be traced to the migration stream from Central Asia to India (Tumbe 9). In the ancient and medieval eras, each Indian kingdom extensively experienced the phenomena of migration. The tendency of population consolidation in major cities of ancient India including Pataliputra, Mathura, Vidisha, Vaishali, Kaushambi, and Ujjain was considered the consequence of migration from rural-to-urban areas (Bhagat 30).

The trajectories of migration in the Global South are closely associated with the history of war, colonialism, and forced displacement (Siapera 104). After the death of the emperor Aurangajab, foreign merchants started to enjoy "extra-territorial rights on India's soil" by using the opportunity of the fragility of the Mughal empire (Moitra 28). The Battle of Plassey in 1757 established the Company Raj in the country and a new phase of colonial plunder and internal migration was prompted by the East India Company. Paradoxically, the new phase was totally in a reverse direction in comparison with the previous tendency of rural to urban migration in India. East India Company's economic policy ruined India's flourished market of silk and cotton by the rapid proliferation of machine-produced cloth materials. According to Bhagat "as consequences of deindustrialisation, a large number of people of the artisan class

and their dependent families migrated to the countryside" (Bhagat 30-31). Along with fabric, the decline of other industries such as jute, iron, steel, papers etc. also undermined India's economic prosperity, strengthening the urban to rural migration. As an effect India's economic condition had severely deteriorated.

The tendency of internal migration in India was quite different in the British Raj compared to the Company Raj. After 1850 to increase profitability as well as to maintain strong imperial control British rulers established heavy industrialisation including railway, mining and agricultural production & distribution of cotton, indigo, opium, tea, jute etc. (Tumbe 27-28). Modern industrial capitalism set foot in India mainly through the cotton textile industry of Bombay, Ahmedabad; jute and chemical industry of Calcutta; coal mining in Ranigunj, Jharia, Bokaro region; paper industry in Lucknow and Titaghur; gold mining in Mysore; cement industry in Madras; iron and steel industry in both Calcutta, Madras (Habib 100-109). All of these labour-intensive sectors were entirely dependent on the migrant labour force of the country and mainly centred on the colonial port cities like Calcutta, Bombay, and Madras. More than 60% of workers in the jute industry of Calcutta in 1897 migrated from other provinces. In jute mills twenty-three years later in 1921, 33.44% of the migrant workers came from Bihar, 23.25% from Uttar Pradesh and 11.42% from Odisha. The same inclination was also observed in the cotton mills of Bombay at that period. A prolonged work schedule of fifteen hours was part of the daily routine of the jute mill workers during that period. Also in the coalfields, there were no fixed hours to work underground and overground (Habib 121-23). The work environment in factories and living conditions in newly developed slum areas of urban cities were equally vulnerable to migrant workers. The initial stage of modern industrialisation in colonial India evidenced endless exploitation of workers as arduous toil from dawn to dusk, low wages, fines, absence of guidelines for work hours etc.

Migrant Workers in Pre-Covid India

After the independence in 1947, India's journey rooted in Nehruvian socialism started toward a tryst with destiny. Highly influenced by the development model of Stalin in the post-October Revolution era in Russia, India adopted the five-year plan programme in 1951 under the leadership of Nehru for the process of nation-building. In India, the first five-year plan put the impetus on agricultural production. Whilst in the second and third five-year plans onwards the focal point of development shifted from agriculture to rapid industrialisation.

Utilising the opportunity of the Great Depression and two successive world wars Indian industrialists like Tata, Birla, Singhania, Dalmia & Jain, etc. accomplished to accumulate an independent capitalist base between 1914 to 1947 (Chandra et al. 464). After the independence, Indian capital started to dominate in major industrial sectors and a few initiatives of social security measures were undertaken for the welfare of the workers. The clamour for the rights of the workers became vital in the decade of sixties when the public sector expanded through the nationalisation of principal industries including banking, insurance, and mine (Rudolph and Rudolph 259).

On a legal provision various laws were implemented for the protection of workers in independent India such *as The Minimum Wages Act, 1948; the Contract Labour (Regulation and Abolition) Act, 1970; the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976; Interstate Migrant Workmen Act (Regulation and Conditions of Service), 1979* and the *Building and Other Construction Workers (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996* etc. (Jane 82-83). *Interstate Migrant Workmen Act (Regulation and Conditions of Service), 1979* of India was considered the first attempt in South Asian countries to enforce specific legislation on internal migration. Thereafter, the poor enforcement of the law proves it feeble and insufficient for the huge number of internal migrant workers in India (Sethi and Kundu 595). The Census Report

2011 estimated 450 million migrants across all Indian states and union territories. By explaining the growth of internal migrants Bhagat et al. enumerates approximately 200 million inter-district and inter-state migrant workers in contemporary India (Bhagat et al. 713).

After the economic reform of 1991 expansion of urban areas, the growth of the service sector and infrastructure development abruptly surge the domain of the informal economy in India. In neoliberal India, the major labour force of the informal economy is constituted by internal migrants. The cheap and unskilled labour of unorganised sectors structured the relationship between neo-liberal capital and labour in India (Rajan and M 595). UNESCO in 2013 advocated for a better governance system in terms of a specific set of establishments, regulations and safeguards for internal migrants in India.

Chapter XI of the labour code, the Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions Code (OSHWC), 2020 made regulations for inter-state migrant workers neglecting intra-state migrant workers though they also face similar precarious circumstances and abuses. Section 59 of the labour code applies only to establishments with ten or more inter-state migrant workers while the Economic Census 2016 reported that 98.34% of establishments in the non-agricultural field are engaged with less than ten workers. In this way, most of the establishments came outside this regulation and it prevented the workers from having access to relief measures under this enacted code (Namrata).

Economic challenges caused by pandemic

As per the World Economic Outlook of IMF (2021), the global economy is estimated to have contracted 3.5% by 2020 and the Indian economy is estimated to have contracted 8% during the FY 2020-21 (April-March). According to the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy (CMIE), The rate of unemployment reached 27.1% in India on May 3, 2020 (Vyas). There was an obvious negative impact on their average household income and the bearing of daily

expenses. A survey conducted on migrant workers in six states of India namely Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Odisha, Chattisgarh, and West Bengal revealed that the household income of migrants dropped by 85% in June-August 2020 (Gulati et al. 3). Nevertheless, the reach and access of governmental measures depended on the migrant workers' admittance to entitlements such as having a ration card, Aadhaar card, Jan-Dhan account etc. Moreover, the accessibility to entitlements at the destination states has been comparatively low for the migrants due to the lack of required documentation (Singh, n.p.). Previously One Nation One Ration Card scheme was launched by the central government in 2019 to create an efficient Public Distribution System. Hence the implementation process is slow following the political contradiction and federal structure of the country (Namrata, n.p.).

Media Spectacle: Theoretical Understanding

Media spectacle is a relatively new instrument of semiotic interpretation in the prevalent socio-political milieu which is effectively used to decode "signs of the times" (Kellner, "Media Spectacle" 17). The spectacle is a media-driven ideological phenomenon that inculcates capitalist values in broader social reality (Bunyard 23). The concept of media spectacle emerged in American journalism with the emergence of 24x7 television news channels in the 1980s. CNN played a significant role in the promotion and propagation of media spectacle during the Persian Gulf War in 1991. Following the notion of 'instant history' and 'image history' George Gerbner explained the war as "an unprecedented motion picture spectacular". Moreover, he argued that "Desert Storm was the first major global media crisis orchestration …." (Gerbner 244-247). Critical media theorist Douglas Kellner analysed the concept of media spectacle based on French thinker Guy Debord's critique of the capitalist imperative in mediatisation. Kellner saw the Debordian concept which emerged in the late 1960s as still relevant in understanding contemporary society and media in terms of capitalism. Kellner

succinctly stated "… the emergence of new media, new forms of global capitalism, new crises of neoliberalism, and new models of political struggle call for updating of Debord's concepts in a transformed socio-economic, political, and cultural context" (Kellner, "Media Spectacle and" 14).

Debord in his book *Society of the Spectacle*, elucidated spectacle as the "visual reflection of ruling economic order" (Debord 10). He was a part of the Situationist International (SI) group developed by intellectuals in the decade of the 60s influenced by the Avan-garde French Aesthetic Movement. The group fundamentally worked to analyse the situations of the truth of social existence in the context of ideological overdetermination of the commodified spectacles in modern society.

The tradition of analysing Marxist critical theory to understand the ideology of mass-mediated culture was started by the neo-Marxists of the Frankfurt School during the Nazi regime in Germany. Scholars of the Frankfurt School Adorno and Horkheimer coined the term *culture industry* to specify the notion of mass culture as a result of monopoly capitalism in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. The Adornoian critique and also German-Jewish thinker Benjamin's *Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* initially developed the analytical tradition of the dialectic of cultural artefacts such as poetries, theatre performances, newspapers, radio soap operas, television programmes, films, and popular music to interpret identity, class consciousness and capitalist values and its underlying context.

Both the Frankfurt School and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies critically analysed a vast array of Debord was also a neo-Marxist and his radical, anti-establishment points of view were intensely influenced by socio-political upheavals in 1968. Debord posited that "when the real world transformed into mere images, mere images become real beings …."

(Debord 11). The Debordian concept of spectacle as a form of 'mediated images' is a 'materially reconstructed illusion' (Kang 210). On a similar note, in Cultivation Analysis communication scholars also discussed the idea of the symbolic environment which grew out of a representation of pseudo-reality through televised programmes (Gerbner and Gross 184). Kellner analysed the style and structure of media spectacle based on Debord's theoretical interpretation of the integrated spectacle. The contemporary visual culture is highly dominated by diverse forms of media spectacles concerning the promotion, reproduction, circulation and sale of commodities. According to Kellner "… media spectacles are those phenomena of media culture that embody contemporary society's basic values, serve to initiate individuals into its way of life, and dramatize its controversies and struggles, as well as its modes of conflict resolution". The intrinsic nature of spectacle is the narrativasation and dramatisation of an event. The dramatic representation of news and events in media constructs spectacles that dominate certain news cycles (Kellner, "Media Spectacle" 2-3). Dominant media represent certain issues in spectacular forms which are often useful to determine the history of that particular era. The spectacles contain both meaning and agenda which creates a space of debate and discussion for mass audiences (Debord 9).

Kellner criticised Debord's concept as monolithic because only the neo-Marxist approach is considered to analyse the construction of spectacle. Rather Kellner argued that his concept of media spectacle borrowed elements from British cultural studies, French postmodern theories along with Frankfurt School (Kellner, "Media Spectacle and" xvii). The Debordian notion of spectacle is mainly based on consumer society whereas Kellner focused on his concept of media spectacle as a technology-driven cumulative mediatisation of contemporary events. The spectacles are constructed to make one see the world which ultimately inculcates passivity and separation (Debord 16). This interpretation leads to the notable difference between the

Debordian and Kellnerian concepts of spectacle. For Kellner "spectacle itself is a contested terrain that can be as a force of political opposition and resistance, as well as domination and hegemony—and can be a site of contestation, reversal, and even revolution …" (Kellner, "Media Spectacle and" xvii). Douglas Kellner in his books to contextualize his argument exemplified media spectacle through events like the 9/11 terror attacks, Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, US presidential politics and so on.

Migrant Crisis: A Media Spectacle

The Indian government adopted the economic principles of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation in the 90s which inevitably paved the way for commercialisation in the media industry. Media convergence and ownership consolidation correspondingly strengthen the commercialisation of the media industry and also often restrict the notion of pluralism in India. Thus, the ownership pattern of the mainstream media revealed that the fourth pillar of democracy is in the hands of a few big business establishments. The construction of media spectacle is also a part of the commercialisation process which is closely related to the market economy. In the last two decades, several issues such as 26/11 terror attack, anti-corruption movement, protest after Delhi Gang Rape Case, Pulwama attack and subsequent Surgical Strike, countrywide movement against NRC-CAA and recently moon landing of Chandrayaan 3 & inauguration of Ram Mandir etc. emerged as mega-spectacles in the Indian media sphere. Kellner opined that "the scope of the spectacle has thus increased in the past decades with the proliferation of new media and social networking sites like Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, and the like that increases the breadth and participation of the spectacle" (Kellner, "Media Spectacle" 3). In India, a major volume of the educated youth uses social media which amplifies the spectrum of freedom of speech and expression, involvement in debate and discussion, and formation of the public sphere over digital space. Eventually, the

migrants' long march rapidly spread through social media due to intense emotional appeal and turned into a spectacular event.

The spectacle of visibility of invisible

Out of the total workforce of India, 90.7% belongs to the informal sector and a major part is migrant workers (Murthy 3). The economic and infrastructural growth has been made possible because of the intensive labour of these internal migrant workers throughout the country. They have been the major drivers of the economic growth of the country since the introduction of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation as a pronounced governmental policy. Hence in the democratic structure of India, various factors like the diversity of 'employment context, spatial dispersion and a high degree of mobility' simultaneously work as constraints to access their voting rights. Therefore, the dichotomy is, migrant workers turned into a non-existent political entity in the country's electoral politics (Bandopadhyay 13). These are the prime reasons that a significant percentage of this unorganised community remains invisible.

Since the colonial era, internal migrant workers never attained such prominence in the mainstream mass-mediated space. The magnitude of the crisis shaped the most invisible section of society as a mega-spectacle during the lockdown period. During the lockdown, visual imagery in media transformed the "hitherto paradoxical invisibility" of the marginalised migrant issue into "hyper-visibility on the highway". Authors also argued that the media portrayed the sheer struggle of migrant workers by overshadowing the opaque structure of the political economy in India where unequal and distorted development forced such flow of migration in search of a better way of life (Sharma and Agnimitra 151).

Spectacle of misery

At the initial stage of the lockdown in India, migrant workers all over the country faced an extraordinary situation due to the sudden cessation of all economic activities including the

manufacturing, construction, trade and service sectors. The migrant workers had to go through the loss of livelihood and food insecurity as the production network and supply chain had been stopped during that period. In many cases, they are also being denied wages overdue for their past work and lost accommodation in their workplaces. The mainstream media narratives dramatically represented the tragedies of stranded migrant families. Media frames such as desperation to flee from the city; death over exhaustion, hunger & suicide; indignation toward migrants; stigmatised as a carrier of the virus; borders within a border etc. were perpetuated with the striking visuals. One of the leading media houses, *India Today* Group published a database of 238 migrant workers who died during their homeward journey as of the end of May 2020 (Rawat n.p.). The major causes of such deaths were identified as exhaustion due to walking and standing in lines, starvation and financial distress, accidents during reverse migration, and deaths in Shramik trains.

The migrant workers had to go through severe violations of human dignity during the reverse migration process. They had to face discrimination such as being stigmatised as the spreader of the virus during their journey towards home in the destination, source states and also in quarantine centres. The racial discrimination and casteism in the social distancing mechanism manifested wider social isolation and social hierarchy in village society. Thus, it also resulted in domestic violence in the case of the women migrant worker. Incidents like disinfectant being sprayed on migrant returnees have also been reported in media in Uttar Pradesh (Omar Rashid n.p.).

In reference to a PIL Indian government blamed the media in the Supreme Court for disseminating fake news and spreading panic among migrant workers. Therefore, the apex court ordered the media to publish official information only. In response, the Editors Guild of India in 2020 expressed grave concern by stating that "No democracy anywhere in the world

is fighting the pandemic by gagging its media". In the context of curbing press freedom, Koppikar, drew attention to a panel discussion on Doordarshan where the CEO of Prasar Bharati, Shashi Shekhar Vempati criticised the media for promoting journalism of misery (Koppikar 223-224).

Spectacle of (Im)mobility

Initially, after the announcement of the lockdown with the restrictions on movement and transportation migrant families started their distant homeward journey by bicycle, trucks, containers, handcarts, and even the majority on foot individually or in small groups. Minister of State for Road Transport and Highways, V.K. Singh informed the parliament that from March to June 2020, approximately one crore migrant labourers made their way back on foot to their home states (The Hindu, "Over 1 crore migrant" n.p.). There was a dearth of food and shelter during their thousands of kilometres journey towards uncertainty. Many of them faced extreme situations even loss of lives due to exhaustion and dehydration during the walk mostly on an empty stomach over a 40-degree Celsius temperature. Choolayil and Putran raised the question of asymmetrical power dynamics as the government had undertaken efficient procedures for deporting stranded citizens in foreign countries neglecting the appropriate measures for interstate migrants (Choolayil and Putran 233).

They also had to face the onslaught of the authorities for violating the lockdown rules and are often stranded due to government directives to seal interstate borders (Mallick and Sen 35). A PTI photographer Atul Yadav took a heart-wrenching photograph of a construction worker named Ram Pukar Pandit crying helplessly at the roadside in Delhi became 'the symbol of India's migrant worker tragedy' (The Hindu, "Coronavirus lockdown | Image" n.p.). He lost his one-year-old child and was unable to return to his native place in Bihar due to the lockdown. Another photo of migrant worker Dayaram Kushwaha carrying his little boy during the arduous journey from Delhi to Madhya Pradesh taken by Danish Siddiqui of *Reuters* also cogently articulated the situation of helpless migrants.

The central government allotted special trains but much later on May 1, 2020 and allocated an initial fund of INR 29,000 crore to the Disaster Response Fund (SDRF) for providing food and shelter to the stranded migrant workers. The government of India also instructed the state governments to set up camps for the returnee migrant workers and to ensure their health check-ups on a mandatory basis (Sarmin 171). In many cases, the arrangements for returning them to their native places by Shramik trains and interstate buses had been poorly coordinated. Additionally imposing a mandatory online ticket booking system also seemed difficult for many migrant workers as they were not accustomed to the e-services. In such a context political cacophony between the center and state government obtained considerable media focus (Khan and Arokkiaraj 8).

Spectacle of subalternity

The migrant mobilisation during the lockdown was neither an organised effort by any political or social group nor a part of a collective decision of migrant workers. It was completely a spontaneous and desperate reaction of the migrants to the ambivalence caused by the sudden lockdown and loss of livelihood. In this context instead of the monopoly of influential actors and privileged class of the power structure, subalternity took over the mediated time and space. The flow of shocking visuals of migrant workers flooded the content of all sorts of Indian media during that period and constructed a 'spectre of nativism' (Szabla n.p.).

In the recent past, the Kisan Long March in Maharashtra in 2018 formed a subaltern-dominated media spectacle that was organised by All India Krishak Sabha (AIKS), the farmer's union of the Communist Party of India (Marxist). But in this regard, the dichotomy of 200 km march of approximately 70,000 farmers from Nashik to Mumbai was an organised political action, unlike the migrants' long march.

Counter-spectacle

The situation caused due to the outbreak of the pandemic claimed wide media attention followed by pouring distressing spectacles and myriads of dreadful images of the precarious situation of migrant labourers in India. The human-interest narratives in the mainstream media transformed the issue into a public agenda along with the intervention of the social media, civil society and judiciary. On the other hand, in a parallel way, the discourse of 'disaster nationalism' was evoked by the populist right-wing government during the pandemic through the symbolism of banging utensils, lighting candles, Janata curfew, showering flower petals over hospitals in a spectacular form. These sorts of counter-spectacles were also reinforced through the Man ki Baat and Prime Minister's addresses to the nation which marked the lockdown measure and subsequent plight of people as a 'normal paradigm' for 'war for life' in 'a state of exception' (Basu and Basu 227). The nexus between the neoliberal economy and religious nationalism in India branded the governmental pandemic response as 'necessary for the good of the nation' (Dutta 218). As an effect media here became a passive bearer of the policy framework of the government through the spectacles of power which affirmed the idea of *Ideological State Apparatus* by Althusser (Brennen 4). The media hardly formed a firm agenda for the reformation of the Indian economy favourable to the rights of the migrant workers. Quoting Debord in this context seemed to be regarded as ideal, "the fetishistic appearance of pure objectivity in spectacular relations conceals their true character as relations between people and between classes" (Debord 13).

Conclusion

The deindustrialisation in the Indian economy during the East India Company's regime first witnessed a large-scale urban to rural migration flow. Due to the lockdown, the same tendency

of reverse migration has been observed in India after seven decades of independence. Commencing from the colonial period, the core nuances of capitalism are to promote unequal development which in turn sharply widens the gap between rural and urban growth. The migrant issue has been widely neglected by successive governments of independent India, mainstream media and political forums of the nation-state.

During the migrant crisis despite the enormity of visuals in news coverage, the mainstream media preferred to remain silent specifically on the issue of governmental policy failure. Yin explained that the media project the migrant issue "… as a problem to be solved, without accounting for the unequal power structures, such as capitalism, imperialism, and colonialism, which designate the process and outcome of migration and migrant populations' situations" (Yin 235). Eventually, commercialised media became a mere string in the cobweb of capitalism. Hence, the crisis of internal migrants witnessed the rise of a profound subaltern voice in public discourse with a set of temporalities and trajectories. In India, migrant workers' visibility during the pandemic constructed oppositional media spectacles following its inherent meaning and agenda.

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