

## COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACT ON MIGRANT WORKERS IN INDIA

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### **Abstract**

The Covid-19 pandemic has made migrant issues unforeseeable, unbearable and beyond comprehensive scrutiny. Internal informal migrant workers of India had a bolt out of the blue to their life and livelihood by the unexpected and poorly coordinated nationwide lockdown imposed on 24 March 2020 by the central government to contain the spread of the Coronavirus. The unprecedented, unreasonable, and ungraded complete stringent nationwide lockdown showcases the true and yet disgusting fate of the migrant workers in India, an abandoned and unaccounted workforce in the country.

The author describes some of the tragic experiences of migrant workers due to the denial of fundamental human rights. In the second section, the author proposes a few measures for the welfare of migrants in India. What is urgent is to see issues by putting on one's migrant garb along cultural and religious belief lines. In such circumstances, the author suggests that act according to one's well-informed conscience than by the measure of convenience.

**Keywords:** Coronavirus; Family; Human Rights; Lockdown; Migrant Workers; Moral Responsibility

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## Introduction

The cry of a woman migrant worker, “We have no food, no home, no income. My children are starving,” could be echoed by any one of the roughly 400 million workers in India who are dependent on daily wages for their survival.<sup>1</sup> P. Chidambaram and P. Chakravarty present a blueprint for economic revival without compromising on the dignity of life. They state that “we need not make a choice between saving lives and protecting livelihoods. We can achieve both through a ‘smart’ lockdown and careful economic management.”<sup>2</sup> As the Covid-19 pandemic unfolded in India, both lives and livelihood were terribly hit and it might take a few years to get back on track, though we are blessed in disguise to live with the new normal. No magic wand in the hands of a single leader; the mantra seems to be the collaborative and compassionate efforts of communities through dialogue and sharing of expertise and resources.

“The love of Christ towards migrants urges us (cf. 2 Cor 5:14) to look afresh at their problems, which are to be met with today all over the world.”<sup>3</sup> Problems of the migrants, across the globe, have only increased in number and details ever since the publication of the document. The Covid-19 pandemic has made migrant issues further unforeseeable, unbearable and beyond comprehensive scrutiny, and the migrants all the more vulnerable given the variants of Corona virus, in spite of developing different vaccines in a short span of time that are being rolled out in different parts of the world in a war-footing manner.

Internal informal migrant workers of India had a bolt out of the blue to their life and livelihood by the unexpected and poorly coordinated nationwide lockdown imposed on 24 March 2020 by the central government to contain the spread of the Corona virus. Everything came to a standstill and all activities shutdown, pushing the population to abounding chaos and overwhelming suffering. The pandemic Covid-19 and the nationwide lockdown hit hard the migrant workers of India, having nothing to fall back on to survive in almost an alien land and among the people who turned their back on these unorganized labourers—strangers in their homeland. Kaleeshwaram Raj has observed it rightly, “Across the world, a big

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<sup>1</sup>P. Chidambaram and P. Chakravarty, “A Blueprint to Revive the Economy,” *The Hindu*, 17 April 2020. <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/a-blueprint-to-revive-the-economy/article31359290.ece>

<sup>2</sup>Chidambaram and Chakravarty, “A Blueprint to Revive the Economy.”

<sup>3</sup>*Erga migrantes caritas Christi. The Love of Christ towards Migrants*, Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Migrants and Itinerant People, Vatican City, 2004, §1.

calamity can have a tendency to make the state stronger and the people weaker. The present infestation is no exception.”<sup>4</sup>

The plight of the migrant workers is picturesquely illustrated in the confession of a migrant worker, “In the cities, they treat us like stray dogs, why would they treat us any better now?”<sup>5</sup> Raj observes, “Along with the miseries that the virus has brought in, the plight of migrant workers, household workers, rag pickers, daily wagers, street vendors and other marginalised among the workforce has now become part of the political discourse.”<sup>6</sup>

The unprecedented, unreasonable and ungraded complete stringent nationwide lockdown showcases the true and yet the disgusting fate of the migrant workers in India, an abandoned and unaccounted workforce in the country. The announcement of a complete lockdown for 21 days triggered “a mass movement of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from their place of work in cities to homes in villages across India.”<sup>7</sup>

Though internal migrant workers and landless agriculture labourers are the backbone of the country in building it up and feeding the nation, unfortunately they are “the hardest hit with their women and children during the pandemic.”<sup>8</sup> Raj unearths the Inter-State Migrant Workmen (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act way back in 1979. He highlights,

The Act also provides for adequate wage rates, displacement allowance, journey allowance, etc., along with other facilities. Section 16 of the Act guarantees just and reasonable pays, suitable residential accommodation, free medical aid, etc. Non-compliance with the provisions could invite penal consequences.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Kaleeshwaram Raj, “Freedom in the time of COVID-19,” *The New Indian Express*, 8 April 2020. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2020/apr/08/freedom-in-the-time-of-covid-19-2127186.html>

<sup>5</sup>Nilanjana Bhowmick, “The Coronavirus Pandemic has Left Many of India’s Poor without Jobs, Food, or a Way to Get Home,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/05/they-treat-us-like-stray-dogs-migrant-workers-flee-india-cities/> (19.09.2020).

<sup>6</sup>Raj, “Freedom in the Time of COVID-19.”

<sup>7</sup>“India: UN Chief Says Migrant Worker Plight amid Lockdown Requires “domestic solidarity and unity” among Govt and Society,” Business & Human Rights, Resource Centre, <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/india-un-chief-says-migrant-worker-plight-amid-lockdown-requires-domestic-solidarity-and-unity-among-govt-and-society/> (11.10.2020)

<sup>8</sup>Arabinda K. Padhee, Basanta K. Kar And Pranab R. Choudhury, “The Lockdown Revealed the Extent of Poverty and Misery Faced by Migrant Workers,” <https://thewire.in/author/arabinda-k-padhee-basanta-k-kar-and-pranab-r-choud> (19.09.2020)

<sup>9</sup>Raj, “Freedom in the Time of COVID-19.”

The legal expert discloses yet another Act the country designed, the Unorganised Workers' Social Security Act in 2008, with the laudable objective of providing better quality of life for workers in the unauthorised sector. But these Acts are conveniently ignored and buried in the debris of the past. Kaleeshawaram Raj argues,

These legislations were not only breached but even forgotten by the governments at the Centre and states. The radical provisions of the statutes remained a non-starter. Had it been otherwise, and had there been imaginative preparatory measures before the inevitable lockdown, the labour scenario would have been different.<sup>10</sup>

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet said, "Pervasive challenges remain for hundreds-of-thousands of migrant workers in India whose lives were upended by the sudden lockdown across the country, in response to the threat of the Corona virus pandemic."<sup>11</sup> She was dismayed by the plight of "the informal migrant workers affected, many of whom were, in effect, forced to leave the cities where they worked at just a few hours' notice, unable to pay for rent or food."<sup>12</sup>

A bird's-eye view of the impact of the Covid-19 on the migrant workers in India is given below:

Indian migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic have faced multiple hardships. With factories and workplaces shut down due to the lockdown imposed in the country, millions of migrant workers had to deal with the loss of income, food shortages and uncertainty about their future. Following this, many of them and their families went hungry. Thousands of them then began walking back home, with no means of transport due to the lockdown.<sup>13</sup>

The government in the house of the parliament admitted that it has no data regarding the number of migrant workers, the invisible and yet inevitable labour force keeping the wheels of the economy moving. Such admittance is a testimony to the nickname, "No Data Available or No Data Alliance" which the ruling NDA government has earned. This attitude shows the indifference of the central dispensation to the wellbeing of the migrant workers and their families.

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<sup>10</sup>Raj, "Freedom in the Time of COVID-19."

<sup>11</sup>"India: Migrant Workers' Plight Prompts UN Call for 'domestic solidarity' in Corona Virus Battle," 2 April 2020, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1060922> (9.10.2020).

<sup>12</sup>"India: Migrant Workers' Plight Prompts UN Call for 'domestic solidarity' in Corona Virus Battle," 2.

<sup>13</sup> "Indian Migrant Workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic," [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian\\_migrant\\_workers\\_during\\_the\\_COVID-19\\_pandemic](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_migrant_workers_during_the_COVID-19_pandemic) (19.09.2020).

Chaitan Choithani and Reshma Roshania observe, “The data systems have traditionally kept the issue of internal migration on the margins, and never given it the importance it deserves.<sup>14</sup> This neglect of internal migrants is “more systematic, and this tragedy has been ongoing for decades.”<sup>15</sup> Labour migrants “often live in appalling conditions. Most work in the informal sector, earn low wages, lack security and political voice, and face discrimination.”<sup>16</sup> The invisibility of millions of migrants from official statistics has resulted into a much skewed understanding of internal migration and its role in development.<sup>17</sup>

### **I. The Mounting Miseries of Migrant Workers of India**

Though the internal migrant workers of India are the builders and wheels of Indian economic development, it is unfortunate that they are treated as strangers and foreigners in their own land. Moreover, at the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic and because of the stringent lockdown imposed by the Central Government, these migrant workers were thrown out by their exploiters and they were stranded on streets without food, drink, and shelter.

**Exodus – Exclusion – Expulsion of Migrant Workers from their Work Places:** With no work and no money, Covid-19 and the consequent lockdown forced the migrant workers to go on a mass exodus to their villages and homes. The mass exodus or exclusion or expulsion of the migrant workers made the scenes of the post-partition of India alive, an inhuman and horrifying story of the builders and keepers of the cities:

Since the end of March, when the government closed borders and halted public transportation, hundreds of thousands of migrant workers have left cities despite fears that they’d encounter the police, run out of food or water, or succumb to the searing heat. They walked, cycled, and hitchhiked, often along the only route they knew: train tracks. Fathers carried children on their shoulders, women balanced belongings on their heads, people

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<sup>14</sup>Chetan Choithani & Reshma Roshania, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?” *The Wire*, 28 May 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/migrants-internal-international-lockdown> (09.10.2020).

<sup>15</sup>Choithani & Roshania, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?”

<sup>16</sup>Choithani & Roshania, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?”

<sup>17</sup>Choithani & Roshania, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?”

squatted atop crowded trucks—all determined to find a way home.<sup>18</sup>

Having no shelter and food for themselves, the migrant workers had to return to their homes; with factories and construction sites closing down, many set off to re-join their beloved ones before they would starve to death. The cities that migrants build and fuel have been hostile to them.<sup>19</sup>

**1. Jobless, Penniless, Foodless Setting of Migrant Workers in India:** Migrant workers, most of them daily-wage workers, were out of work due to the complete lockdown. These labourers and their families bear the brunt of the unemployment due to the shutdown. The election campaign of the BJP *sabka sath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas* has almost proved to be contradictory and controversial in its delivery *apanon ke sath, aameeron ka vikas. aam janata ka vinash*.

**2. Labour Law Ordinances: the Peril of Labourers and the Empowered Employers:** A few of BJP governed states like Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat sought to temporarily revise their labour laws in early May with the purpose of attracting industries and investments.

3. While the reform of the Indian Labour Laws was on the table of the government, Labour Unions did not welcome the ordinances promulgated by three BJP ruled states. They challenged the ordinances, “By increasing working hours, the state wants to literally break their bodies, their freedom and their dignity. By taking away any serious pretence of grievance redressal, the state wants to immobilise all questions of justice. States want to ensure that labour has no bargaining power left.”<sup>20</sup>

The Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) observed on the issue that “migrant workers’ problems have aggravated during the novel coronavirus-triggered lockdown mainly because there is ‘gross

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<sup>18</sup>Nilanjana Bhowmick, “The Coronavirus Pandemic has Left Many of India’s Poor without Jobs, Food, or a Way to Get Home,” <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/05/they-treat-us-like-stray-dogs-migrant-workers-flee-india-cities/> (19.09.2020).

<sup>19</sup>Choithani & Roshania, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?”

<sup>20</sup>Pratap Bhanu Mehta, “Ordinances by States to Change Labour laws are a Travesty,” *The New Indian Express*, May 12, 2020 <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/industrial-relations-code-india-labour-law-amendment-pratap-bhanu-mehta-6405265> (02.10.2020)

violation' of laws by most of the states."<sup>21</sup> Criticising the freezing of labour laws as well as the increase in the working hours from eight to 12 hours, Virjesh Upadhyay, the General Secretary of BMS stated, "we are pushed to the wall and there is no other way out except going for agitation."<sup>22</sup>

On account of the ordinances, the labourers, including the migrant labourers, are made puppets at the whims and fancies of the employers. Pratap Bhanu Mehta opines, "These ordinances confirm the worst fears that the pandemic emergency will be used to amass arbitrary powers at a time when it is not even possible to protest."<sup>23</sup> The author indicates the imminent dangers emerging from these ordinances, like, a systematic assault on whatever little bargaining power labour has left, an ideological assault on Indian labour, and the cultivation of authoritarianism.

**4. Denied their right to life:** The migrant workers of India during the pandemic Covid-2019 because of the lockdown had to face numerous issues to maintain their lives, like, joblessness, pennilessness, lack of food and homelessness. They were an abandoned populace without means to life and livelihood. "Some have died of exhaustion from walking hundreds of kilometres to return to their villages, others have died by suicide from the fear of coronavirus and livelihood loss, and many more are on the brink of starvation. But their cries for help have gone largely unheard."<sup>24</sup>

**5. Deprived of their right to movement and transportation:** The nationwide lockdown for many months left no option to the migrant workers but to travel back to their village or home. They were deprived of their right to movement during the lockdown, for there was no public transportation at their service. This curtailed their freedom to move from cities to their home state or village. Therefore, they had recourse to walk long distances.

**6. Disregard for their human dignity:** The migrant workers with their families trudging long distances to get back home was a pathetic scene to watch and something which may be compared with scenes

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<sup>21</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/may/14/rss-backed-bharatiya-mazdoor-sangh-announces-nationwide-agitation-against-new-labour-laws-passed-by-2143354.html> (14 October 2020)

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.newindianexpress.com/nation/2020/may/14/rss-backed-bharatiya-mazdoor-sangh-announces-nationwide-agitation-against-new-labour-laws-passed-by-2143354.html> (14 October 2020)

<sup>23</sup>Mehta, "Ordinances by States to Change Labour Laws are a Travesty."

<sup>24</sup>Choithani & Roshania, "Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?"

of the partition of India. Many died on their journey due to the lack of basic amenities of life.

**7. Disenchanted with life and livelihood.** The migrant workers are the builders of cities and the urban facilities, but they were bankrupt because of the lockdown. There was no place for them to lay their head, who built the high raised buildings; there was no food for them, who served food for the urban settlers; they went bankrupt, who made others rich; they had no public transportation to reach their home, who constructed the super or express highways; they had no means to hire private transportation and nobody came to their aid in their need.

**8. Doors closed and the migrant workers as destitute:** Migrant workers had nothing to hold on to during the lockdown. "Their situation is further complicated by the fact that due to the sub-contractor system, many workers did not know the names of the companies they were working for."<sup>25</sup> They had nothing to do in the given situation and found themselves in a fix. And they were disowned by employers. Moreover, they became an unwanted flock. The voices of Migrant workers echoed, saying: I am hungry, I am thirsty, I am a stranger, I am sick, I am a sojourner, I am homeless and I go about seeking help, but no assistance came from any quarter. "While the challenges of accessing food and ration have been widely reported in the media, the unilateral lockdown has also exposed the precarious, if not oppressive relationship between migrant workers and their employers."<sup>26</sup>

**9. Displaced from work place and distanced from home:** Due to the sudden declaration of the lockdown by the Central Government, they were left with no option: neither work nor shelter were provided at the construction site by the companies, nor means for food and drink to survive in the inclement weather; besides, they were far away from their own home. Their existential experience was one of between the devil and deep sea.

**10. Desolate and deplorable health care:** Many health care institutions did not welcome people with emergencies. The doors of hospitals were shut to patients. In addition, life-saving Covid-19 drugs are being sold on the black market: A BBC investigation has

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<sup>25</sup>Navmee Goregaonkar, "Deserted, Demeaned and Distressed: The Lot of Migrant Workers in the Delhi-Haryana Region," *The Wire*, 29 May 2020, <https://thewire.in/rights/migrant-workers-delhi-haryana-lockdown> (09.10.2020).

<sup>26</sup>Goregaonkar, "Deserted, Demeaned and Distressed: The Lot of Migrant Workers in the Delhi-Haryana Region."

found that two life-saving drugs used to treat Covid-19 patients in India—remdesivir and tocilizumab—are in short supply and being sold for excessive rates on a thriving black market (Vikas Pandey, 7 July).

**11. Danger in managing the waste:** Rubbish collectors have complained that people are mixing used gloves and masks with other waste, and it's putting lives at risk (Pritam Roy, 12 July).

**12. Desperate migrant workers: Hunger may kill us before coronavirus:** Shri Modi imposed a nationwide lockdown in an attempt to slow the spreads of the coronavirus. The restrictions came into force at midnight and will be enforced for 21 days (25 March) and it was extended for many more days.

The most acute problem is faced by migrant labourers: they have no work, no source of income, no access to basic necessities, no quality testing facilities, no protective gear, and no means to reach home. Every day, we hear of migrant labourers walking hundreds of miles, many dying in the process.<sup>27</sup>

**13. The Apex Court on the denial of the grievances of the stranded migrant labourers:** The great shock came from the Supreme Court. The judges dismissed all petitions that challenged the governmental version of the struggles of migrant workers. On March 31, the Solicitor General of India stated casually: "no person is walking on the roads in an attempt to reach his/her home towns/villages." On such misleading statements, Jawhar Sircar writes, "The Court accepted without question and even believed hollow assurances that whatever best was possible has been and is being done."<sup>28</sup> Ajit Prakash Shah wrote that the Supreme Court "has failed to satisfactorily acknowledge that the fundamental rights of migrant labourers have been violated, and ignored these workers when they most needed protection."<sup>29</sup>

**14. Economic Collapse and Miserable Migrant Workers:** Due to the lack of preparation and co-ordination with the states in imposing the lockdown restrictions, "Economic activity came to a grinding halt in the country. The lockdown had devastating impacts on an already slowing economy and people's livelihoods as shops, eateries,

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<sup>27</sup> Ajit Prakash Shah, "Failing to perform as a constitutional court," <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/failing-to-perform-as-a-constitutional-court/article31665557.ece> (15.10.2020)

<sup>28</sup>Jawhar Sircar, "A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers," 29 May 2020. <https://thewire.in/labour/lockdown-migrant-workers-policy-analysis> (9.10.2020)

<sup>29</sup>A. P. Shah, "Failing to perform as a constitutional court."

factories, transport, services and business establishments were shuttered.”<sup>30</sup> As per official data released by the Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation, the Indian economy contracted by 23.9% in the April-June quarter of this fiscal year.<sup>31</sup> Kavaljit Singh commented, “Coupled with a humanitarian crisis and muted policy response, the COVID-19 pandemic has brutally exposed and worsened existing vulnerabilities in the Indian economy.”<sup>32</sup>

**15. Dismay of migrant workers because of non-planning and lack of consultation with the experts:** The Corona virus pandemic had thrown life out of gear. Because the government imposed a nationwide lockdown at short notice and without much thought it contributed to the plight of migrant workers. Misery and tragedy loomed large among the migrant workers that was already on a steady slowdown, especially with the wellbeing of women and the education of children.

**16. Emergency like situation and the lockdown of migrant workers:** Covid-19 and the consequent nationwide lockdown to contain the spread of the virus give rise to a situation similar to the declaration of political emergency. Freedom for gathering and freedom of speech seem to be suppressed by the political system which is taking advantage of the period of shutdown to pass bills or ordinances, having an impact on farmers and migrant workers. Jawhar Sircar narrates the tactics, “True to the nature of the victor of Gujarat-2002, the more the media, both television and print, highlighted the human tragedy, the more was he convinced that it was all a conspiracy of the left and liberals to challenge his infallibility.”<sup>33</sup>

## II. The Measures towards the Welfare of Migrant Workers in India

Migrant workers contribute immensely to the economic progress and development of the country. We need to ensure these migrant workers do not face tragedy of such magnitude in the future. Moreover, they should be treated with human dignity and steps should be taken to ensure their right to decent living conditions, including the welfare of their families and the education of their children.

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<sup>30</sup>Kavaljit Singh, “COVID-19 Has Pushed the Indian Economy into a Tailspin. But There’s a Way Out,” 21 September 2020, <https://thewire.in/economy/covid-19-india-economic-recovery> (14.10.2020).

<sup>31</sup>Singh, “COVID-19 Has Pushed the Indian Economy into a Tailspin.”

<sup>32</sup>Singh, “COVID-19 Has Pushed the Indian Economy into a Tailspin.”

<sup>33</sup>Sircar, “A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers.”

**1. Developing data systems ensuring the wellbeing of migrant workers:** “We need data systems that capture internal migration dynamics, and public policies that provide migrants and their families decent and dignified livelihoods, affordable housing, quality education, and access to health, nutrition and sanitation services.”<sup>34</sup> Such data system enabled cards should be created and delivered to the migrant workers. “Migrants may just touch their cards at any location and their terribly-critical ‘present dwelling’ data would be available to a state that is obsessed with capturing and crunching data.”<sup>35</sup>

**2. Revive inclusive society after the adage, Atithi devo bhavah:** In tune with our culture, the guest is likened to a god,; we need to create neighbourhoods in the city where people feel they are one and united. Furthermore, we need to translate the great ideal: *vasudheiva kutumbakam*, the world is one family, in our homeland with the migrant workers. All need to be understood and accepted as members of the world family. “Creating inclusive cities that accommodate and welcome rural migrants can lay the foundation for an economically and culturally prosperous society.”<sup>36</sup>

**3. Reach out to the needy as the disciples of Christ:** As Christians, we need to extend necessary assistance to the migrants, including, migrant workers. Collaborating with the people of goodwill, we must share our facilities, like, food, drink, shelter, legal assistance to the migrant workers in their necessities, especially in situations such as a pandemic, natural calamities, etc. when they do not have a place to take shelter. Inspired by Christian charity, we should make available our infrastructure facilities, before the governmental agencies so demand. “Despite our best efforts, it is hard to recognize the profound value of human life when we see it in its weakness and fragility. Far from being outside the existential horizon of the person, suffering always raises limitless questions about the meaning of life.”<sup>37</sup>

**4. Reverse migration and preparedness to guarantee the wellbeing of migrant workers:** We notice the reverse migration underway. Once again migrant workers are returning to cities for

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<sup>34</sup>Choithani & Roshania, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?”

<sup>35</sup>Sircar, “A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers.”

<sup>36</sup>Choithani & Roshania, “Why Do We Treat Internal Migrants Differently from International Migrants?”

<sup>37</sup>The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Samaritanus bonus*, 2020.

want of livelihood in the villages. As of now, the ground realities treating migrant workers have not improved, if not worsened. The bargaining power of migrant workers faces severe blow on account of zeroing down of alternatives. It is in the interest of the state to guarantee decent and dignified infrastructure facilities for migrant workers. Besides, the arrangements should be in place to accommodate the families of migrant workers. The education of the children has to be made mandatory. As the reverse migration is underway, ensure holistic and sustainable development for both the employers and employees, including the migrant workers.

**5. Revisit the employment opportunities in villages and towns:** Memories are comparatively short lived today. It is high time to think loudly and act boldly to open employment opportunities in villages and towns so that we can arrest the huge migration of workers to metropolitan cities. In an age of improved transport facilities and better internet connectivity, it is time to focus on the development of self-reliant villages and districts of India.

**6. Remember the divide between the organized and unorganized labourers:** The pandemic Covid-19 is described as a great leveller, but not in the case of the migrant workers. Emily Maitlis of BBC argues, Covid-19 “is a health issue with huge ramifications for social welfare and it is a welfare issue with huge ramifications for public health.” The migrant workers were a disproportionately low paid group. They are more exposed. They did not have any roof of their own under which to take shelter and no source of income to support themselves and their families. The option for working from home did not arise in the case of migrant workers. The pandemic coronavirus threw the migrant workers out of gear, from misery to cruelty; nothing came to their assistance in need.

**7. Repeatedly remind the government about the need for proper planning and coordination in the event of managing the nationwide issue:** Single-man-made crisis is to be handled through appropriate intervention of the public. The announcement of demonetization by Prime Minister caused unwanted chaos, difficulties, tragedies, yielding none of the declared results. The state could also not evade its responsibility and would be compelled to do something beneficial rather than asking citizens to move clang metal and light superfluous lamps.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Sircar, “A Long Look at Exactly Why and How India Failed Its Migrant Workers.”

**8. Respect for the Infrastructure Facilities for and wellbeing of the Family of the Migrant Workers:** Migrant workers are not isolated individuals without their natural family bonds. Arrangements should be ensured for the families of these migrant workers, including the education of their children. The sad story during the lockdown was the scene of the migrant workers trudging long distances braving the scorching heat to reach their families. Were the migrants provided infrastructure facilities for the stay of their families near the work place, they would not have undertaken such an inconceivable exodus in large numbers regardless of poor or inadequate public transportation facilities. The migrant workers are entitled to have a decent and dignified living ambience in the workplace. Infrastructure facilities should be envisaged for the education of the children and also affordable access to public healthcare. The health of the migrant worker depends on the health of their family. Home matters. Migrant workers should be given space and time to celebrate their family life wherever they are.

**9. Respond to the migrant workers by putting on your migrant garb:** “A wandering Aramean was my ancestor” (Deut 26:5). This is an additional reason to recognize, respect, and respond to the migrant workers who pass you by. We have to celebrate life in Christ with all these less privileged in an alien land. “Then you, together with the Levites and the aliens who reside among you, shall celebrate with all the bounty that the Lord your God has given to you and your house” (Deut 26:11).

As a relief measure and as an immediate step, like the Good Samaritan, we are invited to engage ourselves in the alleviation of the misery and tragedy of migrant workers. As the Good Shepherd, for either short term or long term assistance, we are called to cooperate with the government and non-governmental agencies to ensure a system of rescue and rehabilitation of migrant workers from their recurring predicament. The pandemic Covid-19 offers us a wakeup call to recognize, respect, and respond to the needs of migrant workers, beginning with labourers found in our courtyards, treating them with human dignity and the honour due to manual labour.

Social solidarity is critical to a unified national response. Public trust in an intelligent, decisive and compassionate political leadership may appear a non-measurable factor to technical modellers but is a vital ingredient in a country’s pandemic response. New Zealand is a shining example in this

regard. The Titanic of technical modelling was sunk by the unsighted iceberg of political reality.<sup>39</sup>

Whether the Church has done enough for the migrant workers during the pandemic Covid-19 is a question we need to ask ourselves. The Church authorities could have done much more than they have accomplished. Neither the presence of the Church was anything significant, nor did she reach out to the service of the migrant workers. The Church was almost self-seeking and took shelter under the pretext of Government instructions for her own safety and security, developing a kind of phobophobia and not inspiring the members to venture out to help the needy, following the Covid protocol of the authorities.

The challenge confronting us in today's migrations is not an easy one because many different spheres are involved: economics, sociology, politics, health, culture and security. All Christians must respond to this challenge; it is not just a matter of goodwill or the personal charisma of a few.<sup>40</sup>

We may have to live with Covid 19 for months or years. Do not deny or panic. Jesus, our Master and Saviour, says, "Do not be afraid!" (Lk 12:7; 32) and "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37).

## Conclusion

Migrant workers in India, the real builders of cities, true constructors of express highways, the moving wheels of Indian economy, and the backbone of material prosperity of the nation, were forced to set out on a mass exodus, comparable only to the miserable scenes at the time of the partition of India, to reach their home hundreds of miles away from the workplace on foot or with little transportation, on account of the abrupt, inhuman, and unplanned nationwide lockdown imposed on 24 March 2020 to contain the spread of Corona virus, a decision which deprived them of their right to life and livelihood. Braving the heat, the jobless, penniless, foodless, and homeless migrant workers with their families and children trudged their way home, for they enjoyed no protection whatsoever from any corner, including from the apex court, which was found on denial of the grievances of the stranded migrant labourers. Putting our trust in the Lord, who says, "Do not be afraid", and being conscious of our migrant identity among migrants, the

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<sup>39</sup>K. Srinath Reddy, "A Mistaken Measure of Global Health Security," *The New Indian Express*, 2 April 2021. <https://www.newindianexpress.com/opinions/2021/apr/03/a-mistaken-measure-of-global-health-security-2285122.html>.

<sup>40</sup>*Erga migrantes caritas Christi*, § 3.

Church has to collaborate with Government and Non-Governmental Organisations to launch data card to all migrant workers ensuring their dignity, safety, security, and solidarity and take care of their families and children. In the economically emerging India, job opportunities and education infrastructure facilities should be created in villages and towns, so that the incessant flow of migrant workers to cities may be arrested. Above all, let us walk an extra mile to reach out to these ignored and discriminated fellow beings as the missionary disciples of Christ and obey his command, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37).

I would like to conclude this reflection on the plight of internal migrant workers of India following the nationwide lockdown clamped by the Central Government at the outbreak of Covid-19 pandemic with the creative and critical view point of T.J.S. George, a well-known journalist and columnist, which speaks to people of different walks of life:

The reality of our lives stares us in the face. We are opportunistic. We change our positions, not according to our conscience, but as per the convenience of the moment. We are primarily selfish. One may well ask: Isn't it human nature to be selfish? In a way, yes; but it is also human nature to think of your neighbour's interests. In the name of human nature, we can be good or bad citizens. Of course, we always have the choice between good and bad. That is the beauty of democracy. It is, also, its curse.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>T.J.S. George, "Democracy Even in Times of Covid," *The New Indian Express*, "Point of View," 4 April 2021.