

Migrant labourers, Covid-19 and working-class struggle in the time of pandemic: a report from Karnataka, India

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Abstract

Since the imposition of the unplanned lockdown in India, Karnataka Jan Shakti has worked with stranded migrant labourers to respond to a range of issues including starvation, transportation to return home, sexual violence, Islamophobia and labour rights. Karnataka Jan Shakti (KJS, Karnataka People's Power) is a coalition of Left-leaning activist groups and individuals. For the last decade, it has mobilised historically oppressed groups on issues of economic and cultural justice including Dalit sanitation workers, Dalit university students, slumdweller, peasants, nomadic tribes, and survivors of sexual violence. Our approach to collective struggle is shaped by the social analysis tools of Karl Marx, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Shankar Guha Niyogi. In this article, we document and analyse our struggle against situated forms of precarity in migrant lives shaped by class, caste, gender, age, and rural/urban geography which have been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. We also reflect on lessons for movement-building in a political milieu dominated by a hyper surveillant fascist state, communal media apparatus and accelerated, unregulated privatisation under the latest national slogan of Self-Reliant India (*AtmaNirbhar Bharat*).

Keywords: Migrant labourers, Covid-19 pandemic, India, learning in the struggle

Introduction

On March 24 2020, Prime Minister Narendra Modi (BJP, *Bharatiya Janata Party*) announced a three-week national lockdown to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Drawing on his usual blend of Hindu mythology, advertising jingo speak, and martial rhetoric, Modi announced a war against corona. He said, "The Mahabharata war was won in 18 days... Our aim is to win this [corona] war in 21 days" (Times of India, 2020). He gave the country a total of four hours' notice to prepare for the cessation of life as we knew it.

At the time of the unplanned lockdown, the state of Karnataka hosted an estimated 10.9 million migrant labourers¹ (Government of India 2011) out of

¹ Data on internal migration remains scarce. The most reliable data available is the 2011 Census which was only released for public consumption in 2019 (Ahamed 2020). According to this Census, there were 455 million internal migrants in 2011. However, Ahamad (2020) reminds us that this data does not include child and female migrant workers or district-level data. The state

which an estimated 4 million work in the construction industry alone (Deepika 2020). These women, men and children provide the labour that fuels construction, factories and small units, coffee plantations, food service industry, domestic work, waste collection, the taxi industry, the restaurant industry, care industry and other informal and organised economic sectors. Many migrants circulate annually for seasonal work while others have become more or less permanent residents in their adopted state/s. A minority are fortunate to have fixed work while the majority are compelled to look for temporary work and migrate from place to place in search of short-term employment (Mazumdar, Neetha and Agnihotri 2013). Most importantly, these labourers are predominantly from impoverished Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities from the most economically backward regions in the country and across the border in Nepal and Bangladesh (Samaddar 2020). They are the muscle, blood and bones that power the prosperity of Karnataka, and indeed the entire nation. Yet within India, they represent the invisible 99% whose exploitation is intrinsic to the enrichment of the 1%, Indian Dollar Billionaires (Oxfam, 2019).

When lockdown was imposed, the vast majority of them became unemployed overnight.² Shortly thereafter, they ran out of food and money to pay rent. Local authorities declared the high-density slums which most of them called home 'containment zones' and placed severe and overnight restrictions on movement. Migrants living on construction sites were abandoned by their employers and forced to venture outside for food and water when they often encountered anti-Muslim, anti-Chinese³ and anti-outsider abuse (Dalasanoor 2020). In solidarity with Prime Minister Modi, upper class Indians rang bells, banged thalis, and lit *diyas* (oil lamps) from the safety and comfort of their socially distanced, well-supplied homes at regular intervals through the lockdown. However, migrant workers remained invisible to the official gaze until they decided to walk thousands of kilometres home. They had neither money nor food but they refused to allow their precarious lives to descend further into indignity and abuse. This powerful act of resistance led to a steady stream of news reports which documented callous and inhumane treatment by police, officials, and countless others seeking to exploit their desperation.

The death toll from these long marches during the height of the Indian summer got the attention of media and social workers. However, this was a problematic

of Kerala (again) leads the way in terms of keep records, implemented welfare programs and changing the deficit discourse – guests of the state – which enabled the state to take relatively better care of its migrant workers during the lockdown.

² A recent survey by Azim Premji University found that 8 out of 10 urban workers and 6 out of 10 rural workers have experienced job loss since the imposition of lockdown (Center for Sustainable Employment, 2020). Available at <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/>

³ Residents of north-east India and Nepal have long been subject to racialised, gendered and sexualised forms of discrimination. During the lockdown and even before the flare up of the conflict on the Indo-Chinese border in Ladakh, rightwing social media was hard at work circulating fake news about China's role in the pandemic and advocating boycott of Chinese goods.

form of visibility. Official and media discourse became dominated by problematic, gendered representations of migrants as carriers of disease, objects of charity and even superheroes capable of superhuman feats of endurance (Thapliyal 2020). It would take the Modi administration another four weeks to come up with a national plan to transport these workers home by rail and bus. The plan to arrange special trains and buses were given another catchy name, *Shramik (Worker) Specials*, but incommensurate resources to respond to the magnitude of need.⁴

The situation in Karnataka

Karnataka, home to India's Silicon Valley and approximately 53 million people, has historically been one of the better performing Indian states based on the economic and social development indicators. However, the Karnataka Human Development Report reveals that the benefits of the hi-tech development boom are yet to reach poor women, Scheduled Castes (16% of the state population), and Scheduled Tribes (7%). The gap between these three groups and the rest of the population only continues to grow in relation to education and income attainment (Government of Karnataka 2006:312-313).

The ruling nexus in Karnataka today consists of entrenched elites consisting of Hindu upper-caste and class, urban, English-speakers and the relatively new elites from landed peasants - the *Vokkaligas* and the *Lingayats* who are officially classified as Backward Classes.⁵ These two lower caste groups successfully mobilised against the Brahminical caste system which dominated the British colonial state apparatus. However, their social reformist critique and victories never extended to include Dalits. This historical reality provides a partial explanation for why Dalit and Adivasi populations continue to live in extreme poverty and exclusion in a state with 200 years of reservation policies and state subsidies that have benefitted other historically marginalised groups (Manasa, 2000).

Since the late nineties, state-led development has been overtly oriented towards the rhetoric of economic globalisation through a discourse of IT-led growth, privatisation, efficiency, and competitiveness (Sarangapani and Vasavi 2003). Karnataka was one of the first states to secure large loans from the World Bank in return for structural adjustment reforms; and, one of the first states to pilot the World-Bank funded District Primary Education Program (DPEP) in 1994. Since then successive state governments, rightwing and centrist, have promoted

⁴ Senior Counsel Prashant Bhushan filed a public interest litigation (PIL) in the Supreme Court demanding proper food and shelter arrangements for all stranded workers and poor across the country. While the Supreme Court initially declined to intervene on behalf of migrants, similar PILS filed at the state level were treated with more compassion by judges of the High Courts including Tamil Nadu, Gujarat and Karnataka.

⁵ Readers should note that Caste groups classified as 'backward' are distinct from those classified as Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe but they also benefit from affirmative action policies - also known as reservations - some of which were introduced in colonial India.

the neoliberal development model by slashing public sector spending and borrowing money to meet their social obligations (Sarangapani and Vasavi 2003:3406).

Karnataka is currently governed by the BJP under the Chief Ministership of B.S Yediyurappa who came to power after the ruling Congress-JDS coalition collapsed following the defection of 15 elected politicians to the BJP.⁶ Since the Ayodhya movement in the nineties, Karnataka has provided fertile ground for the mobilisation of rightwing Hindu nationalist forces in southern India. This movement has systematically fueled existing divides around language, religion, caste, regional identity in a region historically characterised by every form of cultural diversity.⁷ They were aided in these efforts by Kannada language media which has a long history of casteism and communalism (Haligeri 2020).

At the same time, Karnataka has a long history of grassroots social reform movements dating back to the 12th century anti-caste and anti-patriarchy *Vacchana* movement. The region has been a site for mobilisations for cultural recognition, economic redistribution and environmental conservation including: anticolonial struggle, promotion of Kannada language and cultural identity, recognition of Backward Classes, land rights (of farmers, Adivasis, slum dwellers and squatters), workers' rights, Dalit rights, LGBTQI rights and violence against women.

However, migrant labour largely remain unorganised and unmobilised in the state not in small part due to differences of language, regional identity. These forms of difference continue to divide Dalit and Adivasi groups along with cumulative effects of three decades of rightwing outreach to these communities (Sundar 2002). In Karnataka, key current sites of mobilisation include urban slum evictions in Bengaluru⁸ and the coffee plantations in Kodagu, Chikmagalur and Hasan districts which account for 70% of the coffee production in the country.

Karnataka Jan Shakti (Karnataka People Power)

Karnataka Jan Shakti (KJS, Karnataka People's Power) is an umbrella organisation of Left-leaning activist groups and individuals. For the last decade, it has mobilised communities on issues of economic and cultural justice

⁶ The entire process was engineered by BJP master strategist and Home Minister Amit Shah from his headquarters in New Delhi which then proceeded to repeat the process to bring down elected governments in other non-BJP states (Moudgal 2019).

⁷ The erasure of Muslim histories in this region has been a key strategy. For example, in 2019, Hindutva activists campaigned to remove 18th century Muslim ruler of Mysuru Tipu Sultan from history textbooks. Sultan died fighting the British and subsequently became an almost mythical figure in British colonial discourse as well as postcolonial official and popular histories.

⁸ In 2019, the forcible evictions were attempted in Turubarahalli near Kunadallahalli gate which is home to more than 2000 migrants from West Bengal, northeastern states and Bangladesh. The Alternative Law Forum has filed a court case for the land rights of slumdwellers.

including Dalit sanitation workers and university students, urban slum dwellers, rural landless people, nomadic tribes, and survivors of sexual violence (Thapliyal 2014).

The KJS approach to mobilisation is shaped by anti-caste thinkers and activists including Jyotiba and Savitri Bai Phule (1855) and Dalit leader Dr B.R Ambedkar (1936) for whom caste and untouchability were and remain deep rooted problems in Indian society. We also draw on the teachings of Marxist thinkers including socialist trade union leader Shankar Guha Niyogi who organised the *Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha* (Chhattisgarh Liberation Front, or CMM), a movement of miners, industrial workers, and farmers and gatherers from local Adivasi communities. From the CMM and Niyogi⁹, we have learned that movements of poor people cannot sustain the struggle if their lives are not stable. Hence along with rights, economic stability or rather livelihood and life are important. We have also learned the importance of knowledge produced through indigenous culture, history and the experience of collective struggle (Sadgopal and Namra 1993).

At the time of the lockdown, KJS was part of the nation-wide civil society collective called 'We The People' that had formed to resist a series of anti-Constitutional law and policy reforms introduced by the Modi administration in December 2019, namely the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA), National Registration of Citizens (NRC), and National Population Register.¹⁰ It was a key member of the Karnataka organising committee, *Naavu Bharateeyaru* (which means We The People in Kannada) along with Muslim community activists, student activists, and other pro-Constitution civil society groups. Our organising efforts received a significant boost after thousands of citizens spontaneously gathered outside the Townhall on December 19, 2019, to prevent the police from arresting anti-CAA activists. Since then, the coalition has worked to support the occupation of Bilal Bagh by women from the Muslim community as well as other forms of collective protest in Bengaluru and across the state. Over two months, we had formed district-level Save the Constitution Committees in preparation for the next phase of mobilisation against the 2020 Census data collection. The imposition of the unplanned lockdown conveniently ended this growing movement even though activists were willing to comply with physical distancing and other rules.

⁹ Niyogi was able to organize these groups into a Green-Red coalition by linking questions about development, growth, technology and labour rights to issues of environment and cultural identity (see also Krishnan 2016). Its achievements and imagination for a different world continue to inspire workers struggles in India (see e.g. Scandrett 2019; See also <http://sanhati.com/shankar-guha-niyogi-archives/>)

¹⁰ The cumulative effects of these reforms would be to downgrade Muslims from their status of second class citizens to deprive them of citizenship all together (see e.g. Mishra and Waheed 2020). These exclusionary reforms did not apply to any other religious or cultural minority in the nation. These protests are considered historical in part because of the large numbers of Muslim women who participated in non-violent occupations of public spaces such as Shaheen Bagh in Delhi and Bilal Bagh in Bengaluru (see also Mohanty 2020 in this journal).

Activism during pandemic

In the early weeks of the lockdown, Karnataka was lauded for its Covid-19 response. In keeping with its image of being home to India's Silicon Valley, the state government deployed technology-based surveillance to trace contacts and ensure strict quarantine akin to the Kerala model (Belagere 2020). Unlike Kerala, it turned a blind eye towards the vast population of migrant labourers stranded by the lockdown. For instance, the Public Distribution System (PDS) which provides free rations to the poor excluded people without ration cards, who were disproportionately interstate migrant labourers. This was one of the first issues highlighted by KJS activists which received favourable media coverage and resulted in a change in government policy.¹¹ Since then KJS has worked with migrant labourers to respond to a range of issues including starvation, homelessness, and transportation to return home, sexual violence, labour rights and Islamophobia.

Hunger and Starvation: The joint action committee which was formed during the anti-CAA movement became a spontaneous common platform for corona relief work in Bangalore city. The network grew around community kitchens established by Muslim youth and enabled civil society groups to distribute cooked food to thousands of people on a daily basis under the name of Mercy Mission. In addition, approximately one hundred KJS cadre located across the state¹² identified gaps in the public food distribution system and delivered dry ration kits to communities living in precarity in rural areas including slum dwellers, nomadic tribes and migrant labourers for four weeks. (The ration kits contained rice, dal, edible oil, sugar, onions, cereal, flour, spices, detergent and soap.)

¹¹ In fact, even existing food subsidization programs like the Indira Canteens (modelled on similar programmes in Tamil Nadu) were underutilized. The provision of free food packets to the poor and homeless through the canteens was reversed on the grounds that people were not observing physical distancing and misusing the programme.

¹² KJS covered eleven districts including North Canara, Coorg, Mandya, Bangalore, Thumkur, Davanagere, Bellary, Koppal, Raichur, Bijapur, and Shivamogga.



Figure 1: Poster created for online Workers Rights Campaign¹³. Designed by Pavitra, KJS affiliated student activist.

Migrant worker helpline and survey

After the central government required states to provide transportation for migrants to return home, we began additional strands of work. We formed coordination teams to liaise and support migrant travelers as part of the nationwide Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN)¹⁴. One of the earliest issues we raised was the fact that domestic migrants (residents of Karnataka) were being charged more than twice as much they would normally pay for a bus ticket home. We carried out agitations with our allies including trade unions and other people's organisations. Again, these protests received support from Kannada and English media as well as opposition political parties led by the Congress. Within days, the Karnataka government announced fully free travel for all migrant workers on May 5, 2020. However, the true priorities of the state were revealed when the state government suspended all train and bus travel

¹³ On the occasion of May 1 (2020) Labour Day, KJS started an online campaign through Facebook and Whatsapp called 'Shramika Hakku Abhiyana' (Workers Rights campaign as part of a national campaign for labour rights. The poster shows Ms. Savitramma, a resident of Davanagere district, a pensioner who works as a street vegetable vendor since government rations are not sufficient for an entire month. Lockdown put an end to her only means of livelihood. The poster text states, 'if you are hungry, if your family is affected by the lockdown and the apathy of the government, please join the campaign. Take the photo of you and the family with empty vessels and send it across the Chief Minister of Karnataka through Watsapp to this number.'

¹⁴ On 1 May 2020, the group released a report — *32 Days and Counting: COVID-19 Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and the Inadequacy of Welfare Measures in India* based on a national survey of approximately 17000 workers on issues of food supply, wage payment, and post-lockdown decisions. The report can be downloaded at https://covid19socialsecurity.files.wordpress.com/2020/05/32-days-and-counting_swan.pdf

three short days later. This decision was made to appease powerful lobbies of real estate developers and builders who did not want migrant construction workers to leave Bengaluru. The All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU) described the decision as a violation of the fundamental right of the freedom of movement and one that promoted forced labour.¹⁵ This decision was also reversed within a couple of days due to a national public outcry.

As part of this liaison work, KJS established a migrant worker telephone helpline for 24 hours and 7 days a week. The helpline was managed by nine volunteers who variously spoke Kannada, Telugu, Bengali, Oriya, Hindi and English. Unlike government helplines which limited themselves to dissemination of information, our helpline responded to all requests for aid. These included funds for travel and transportation to the nearest railway station, provision of funds and medicine to family members of workers stuck outside Karnataka, and emotional support. What we learned from callers in the early days of the helpline prompted us to carry out a systematic survey of conditions in working communities living in precarity.

KJS activists in all 30 districts of the state carried out phone or household surveys with migrant labourers¹⁶, small farmers, and sex workers. A total of 1500 individuals answered questions on issues including access to food and contract wages, government officials and facilities, Covid19 testing, and the state government's decision to lift the prohibition on the sale of alcohol (See Figure 2 below) (KJS 2020). In the survey, we also asked farmers about the sale of their harvested crops, government support for planting new crops in the approaching rainy season; and whether the national rural employment scheme needed to be expanded (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, MGNREGS).

¹⁵ The Wire India. May 7, 2020. <https://thewire.in/labour/karnataka-migrants-builders-trains>

¹⁶ The Kannada language version of the study was released on 4 June 2020 in the company of migrant labourers who live in Channahalli Hakkipikki Colony. The Hakkipikki are members of a historically nomadic tribe which remains one of the most economically and socially oppressed communities in the state. Despite sustained government neglect, they have not faltered in their struggle for land and housing rights.

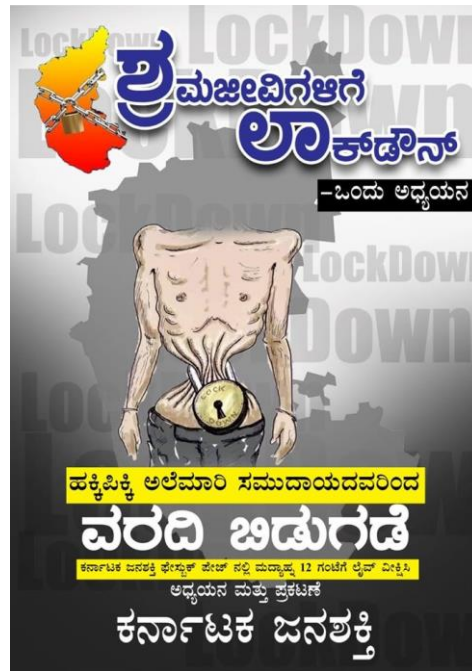


Figure 2: Cover page of Migrant Worker Survey Report (KJS 2020). Designed by Chandrashekhar (KJS activist).

In particular, our survey provided gendered insights into people's lives under lockdown. Our respondents included a total of 284 women labourers, sex workers, transgendered peoples and *devadasis* (female servants of God).¹⁷ Women shared their concerns about domestic violence during the lockdown which increased when the alcohol prohibition was lifted. More than 60% of this group reported that they were unable to access any treatment for the routine ailments including those that accompany sex work (Karnataka Jan Shakti 2020: 47). They shared their worries about not being able to get adequate quantities of food. The lack of income for the last two months also jeopardised the education of their children since this is time for school admissions, payment of fees and purchase of textbooks and uniforms.

Gendered violence

Through the helpline, we learned about the trafficking of two Adivasi women from Jharkhand who were forced into bonded labour in an incense factory near Bengaluru. For more than a year they were illegally confined and raped when they attempted to escape. The women only spoke Santhali and had two young

¹⁷ An estimated 50-100,00 girls and women across continue to be sexually exploited by upper- and dominant caste men through the devadasi system which was legally abolished in 1982.

children with them. KJS arranged for the women to be placed in a shelter and pressured the police to take action against the rapists and factory owner.¹⁸

These gendered encounters align with what we know about the gendered forms of oppression and precarity experienced by women migrant labourers from historically oppressed groups.¹⁹ According to Mazumdar, Neetha et al (2013), women comprise at least 15% of the migrant labour force. They are more concentrated in short-term and circular migration and perform dangerous and exploitative work alongside men on farms, construction sites, brick kilns, textile and other small factory units and so forth. However, they are typically paid far less and rarely on time (Dutta 2019). They are more likely to be subject to sexual harassment and violence from contractors, supervisors and employers (Mazumdar, Neetha et al. 2013). However, official data on the numbers and experiences of female migrant labourers, particularly from Dalit and Adivasi backgrounds, continues to be highly limited by gender- and caste-insensitive concepts (Krishnan 2020; Mazumdar, Neetha et al. 2013).

Islamophobia

On March 28, India learned that a Muslim community known as Tablighi Jamaat had convened a meeting of thousands of followers in Nizammudin Markaz in New Delhi in early March to commemorate the founding of their religious sect. Despite the fact that religious communities of all denominations had held similar meetings up till and even during the early days of lockdown, rightwing media embarked on a furious nationwide campaign about the 'Tablighi Virus' and 'Markaz disease'. Anti-Muslim rhetoric dominated Kannada news media coverage as well accompanied by calls to boycott Muslim businesses and traders (Nagaraj 2020). A halfhearted warning from the BJP Chief Minister did little to stem the deluge of new reports and talk shows which recycled conspiracy theories about corona jihadis in India and Pakistan, sometimes in league with Chinese communists.

At the national level, this mediatized campaign of hate was countered by online media outlets such as The Wire and The Quint. In Karnataka, *Varthabharathi* (Kannada, print and online), *Naanu Gauri* (Kannada, online) and *Gauri Media* (English, online) worked systematically to counter hateful and fake news. KJS has a close working relationship with the latter two media outlets which were established in memory of progressive Kannada journalist Gauri Lankesh who was assassinated by a Hindutva activist on September 5, 2017. Through these Internet media outlets and related social media, our activists actively countered the Islamophobic and fake news discourse circulating in mainstream news media (see e.g. Mutturaju 2020).

¹⁸ See also <https://gaurilankeshnews.com/bangalore-shocking-tale-of-human-trafficking-sexual-assault-and-bonded-labour-of-migrant-advasi-woman/>

¹⁹ See also the Special Issue on Gender, Violence and the Neoliberal State in India edited by Kalpana Wilson, Jennifer Ung Loh and Navtej Purewal (2018).

Activism during pandemic: lessons learned

In this report, we have documented recent struggles against situated forms of precarity in the lives of migrant labour shaped by class, caste, gender, age, and rural/urban geography. In the previous section, we discussed how our current areas of work are oriented to both forcing the state to act as well as contesting how the state acts (Cox 2020).

Our experience over the last ten weeks has reconfirmed the lack of respect for the dignity of the working poor and instead the sheer disposability of their bodies. We say reconfirmed because this knowledge should come as no surprise. Overwhelmingly, these are the people whose lives have been systemically impoverished, whose communities have been historically destroyed by colonial extraction and capitalist dispossession by accumulation (Kapoor 2013). These are the same bodies unceasingly subject to state-sanctioned, gendered forms of coercion and violence, increasingly directly at the hands of the state, as evinced by Kashmir, Chattisgarh, and the northeast of India (Sundar 2018).²⁰ In his seminal book, 'Everyone Loves a Good Drought', journalist P. Sainath²¹ (1996) refers to these communities as development refugees. This term is inappropriate because these migrants are not homeless. Rather, they appear to have been permanently designated collateral damage, a metaphor that fits with current dominant masculinist discourse about the war against the pandemic.

In our endeavors to help migrant workers reach home safely with dignity, we have had multiple opportunities to rethink the relationship between crisis and transformation (Cox 2020). We have learned that Covid-19 pandemic is not the great equalizer in stratified societies. The protections of the neoliberal, neocolonial, and now fascist Indian state are only available to those with historical privileges of caste, gender, race/ethnicity, class and purchasing power. Perhaps this is why the corporations that are laying ruin to India have donated so generously to the PMCare Fund.²²

The BJP administration is using the pandemic as an opportunity to accelerate privatisation in India. This objective has been made unapologetically clear in the so-called *Atmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyan* (Self Reliant India) relief package recently announced by the Central government. The package contains no

²⁰ In her blog piece, Sundar (2018) argues that democracy functions in three ways in relation to precarity and violence: "it is a casualty of violence; it is an enabler of violence and precarity (including the slow violence of starvation); and it is a resource for oppressed groups."

²¹ Sainath is a Magsaysay Award winning journalist and founder-editor of the People's Archive of Rural India (PARI) news network. He also reported on India's agrarian crisis in the 2010 documentary film 'Nero's Guests'.

²² India's largest construction and engineering company Larsen & Toubro donated Rs 150 crores to the Fund while its predominantly migrant construction workers were kept unpaid and virtually captive on locked down construction sites. Protests by thousands of workers on sites in Hyderabad and Kattupili were met by police violence and cessation of water and food supplies (<https://www.newsclick.in/Tamil-Nadu-COVID-19-Lockdown-Migrant-Workers-Denied-Wages-Forced-to-Work>).

provisions to support the working class and poor recover from the economic ravages of the unplanned lockdown (Jha 2020). In evoking *atmanirbharta* or self reliance, Modi²³ is drawing on a concept which resonates with his faith-based audience who can trace it back to a distant but divine Vedic and Brahminical past (Srinivasaraju 2020). The same concept of self reliance underpinned anticolonial struggles but with very different meanings. For liberation thinkers like Phule, Ambedkar and Gandhi, the meaning of self reliance was intrinsically connected to the struggle for freedom and dignity for historically exploited and enslaved groups such as Dalits, Adivasis, bonded labourers and other workers.

Instead, the Modi administration has pushed states to undermine hard won labour rights secured through 135 years of struggle by urban and rural workers (Oomen 2009). Six states tried to increase the working hours for all workers and employees from 8 to 12 hours per day. The Karnataka government also tried to bring an ordinance connected to working hours, Provident Fund and other worker protections without presenting it before the Cabinet. Our mobilisations along with trade unions and civil society allies were able to put a stop to these proceedings. However, the government succeeded in passing an amendment to the Farmers Cooperatives Act which would allow farmers to sell their produce to anyone to the benefit of agrobusiness and multinational corporations (Deccan Herald 2020²⁴). In addition to privatisation, the Indian state has sought out more opportunities to expand surveillance and silence dissent. It is no longer mandatory to install the corona tracking app, *Aarogya Setu*, which has been found lacking on grounds of both security and privacy. However, employers, housing societies, airlines and railways have expanded the reach of the surveillance state by making this track compulsory on behalf of the Modi administration. Furthermore, as lockdown restrictions have eased, the surveillance state has banned all protests, even those which followed physical distancing, group size and other rules. After abdicating responsibility for the wellbeing of migrant labourers to civil society, the state apparatus has continued its persecution of anti-CAA student activists (most recently Safoora Zargar, Devangana Kalita, and Natasha Narwal) and lifelong civil rights activists like Anand Teltumbde, Gautam Navlakha, and Dr. Varavara Rao. These activists have been dragged into the prison industrial complex even as the state is freeing thousands of prisoners in admission of the fact that the virus is spreading rapidly within overcrowded inmate populations.

So where to from here? P. Sainath (1996) reminds us that states welcome crises like droughts and pandemics because they can do anything, they want during

²³ For that matter, not once in two months did Prime Minister Modi mention migrant workers in his weekly televised and radio addresses to the nation. In Week 10 of lockdown he wrote a Letter to the Nation to celebrate completion of one year in office in his second term as Prime Minister where he acknowledged the suffering of migrants (NDTV 2020).

²⁴ <https://www.deccanherald.com/state/karnataka-politics/kumaraswamy-warns-karnataka-govt-against-ordinance-to-amend-labour-laws-and-apmc-836853.html>

these crises²⁵. On the other hand, activists (and anyone with a shred of humanity) can be completely overwhelmed by the sheer magnitude of human suffering and need amongst the poor and working classes. We have to honestly say that there was a palpable sense of panic and fear in movement spaces in Karnataka at the onset of the pandemic. Activists are no exception in this respect. In addition, there have been too many moments during the last three months when we have felt ineffective in all areas of our work. The systematic silencing of rationalist, scientific, 'sane' voices about responses to the pandemic have compounded these feelings. For example, instead of using the lockdown to broadcast scientific education about the coronavirus, the Modi administration chose to rebroadcast Ramayana²⁶ television drama from the 1980s.

Yet even in this time of extreme oppression, we draw inspiration from the resistance and self-respect of migrant workers who have resisted the authoritarian state with unrestricted powers. Migrant workers have resisted in myriad ways: by choosing to walk home; by demanding that they be released from construction sites where they have been kept all but captive; by protesting in large numbers at train stations and so forth.²⁷ These voices of resistance also emerged in our survey (KJS 2020):

“Jaan hai tho kuch dhang ka apne gaon mein kar lenge, yahan nahi ayenge”
(If we survive, we shall do something respectable in our place, but we won't return to this place) (Chotu Sahani who travelled from Coorg to Bengaluru in order to return to his village in Bihar) .

“Am I a terrorist? Why am I being treated like one?” (Arabindo from Assam who was denied travel on Shramik train because of lack of *Aadhar* identification card).

While we cannot be certain as to what the future will bring, we are clear that the issue of informal labour sits at the heart of a structural and logistical reorientation of the economy (Samaddar 2020). Our current demands for immediate relief are the doorway to politicise claims for the rights and dignity of migrant labourers (Della Porta 2020). Looking to the future we see this as an opportunity to revitalize campaigns for sustainable jobs, stability in rural economy, and respect and protection of human rights.

²⁵ Sainath attributes the title to a peasant activist from Jharkhand who noted that drought reliefs are a like a *teesri fasal* (third crop) for people in power who stand to make even more money in the name of relief work.

²⁶ Readers may also recall the 2011 rightwing campaigns to erase 'Many Ramayanas' from University curriculum.

²⁷ The Migrant Workers Solidarity Network has documented migrant workers' resistance across India in an interactive map which can be experienced at <https://www.mwsn.in/resistancemap/>

But we have to start from where we are today. As Laurence Cox (2020: 5) writes, social movements “start from human needs and everyday praxis”. All though collective struggle is not new to us, we find ourselves in a place where we are taking stock and trying to cope with these extreme forms of oppression and injustice shaped by our deeply unequal society.

Shankar Guha Niyogi taught us that working people are the ones to bring change in this world. At the same time many workers filled with the hierarchical and discriminatory ideas and beliefs which shape how the ruling classes view social relations e.g. hierarchies of class, caste, gender and so forth. In Kannada, we say “*Dudiyuva janaru eshtu dina thamma samajika samskrutika moulyagalalli aaluvavara baala hididirutharo, alliyavarege aarthika abhivrudhdhige arthavilla*” (As long as the working people are holding the tail of the ruling class (in their social and cultural values and relationships), economic upliftment and stability means nothing). Therefore, the challenge for us in order to move forward is to facilitate the kinds of learning that enable workers to see that they are the people who generates the wealth for the nation. Many of the migrants that we have had direct interaction with appear broken and their suffering is not yet at an end.²⁸

What is more workable are the familiar tensions and contradictions that accompany movement-building amongst the Left. There are always potential divides based on ideology and practice that cannot be bridged overnight. During the anti-CAA organising, we were able to overcome challenges of sectarianism which threatened to splinter the movement. For example, some Left groups wanted their individual flags and banners to be displayed prominently but we were all eventually able to agree to demonstrate a common Indian identity. The rightwing media had us under tight surveillance and did not miss any opportunities to accuse us of unpatriotic, anti-national behaviour.

All this is to say that movement-building is undoubtedly messy work. Building collective identities and networks of dissent is an incremental and situated process in a political context characterized by the scale of socio-cultural diversity that is India. What we have learned over time is that to act collectively, there has to be a centre which can hold all other forces in mutual faith and cooperation. In this we are reminded the Marxist feminist August Bebel (1904) who urged activists to march separately but strike a united blow. The last six months have taught us that relationships which have been strained and broken can be reconstituted and redeployed in struggles for justice (Della Porta 2020). We have found a new sense of solidarity and a belief that we can rely on each other rather than leave marginalised people to fend for themselves.

²⁸ As readers may know, those who have reached home are being placed in unsanitary and unsafe quarantine centres. In the last week alone, news media have regularly reported the deaths of men, women and children due to food poisoning, snake bites, untreated health conditions and alleged suicide.

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