

Migrant Crisis: Can Civil Society Rebuild Lives and Livelihoods?

September 28, 2020



"At the stroke of the midnight hour, when the world sleeps, India will awake to life and freedom."

– Jawaharlal Nehru's Tryst with Destiny speech on the eve of India's Independence – August 14, 1947

These powerful words by the first Prime Minister of Independent India are etched onto a history of sacrifices, struggles and lives laid by revolutionaries, freedom fighters and the people of India. It has been 73 years since India embarked on an audacious journey of emancipation, leading to a robust democracy. When Dadabhai Naoroji threw light on the state of poverty in the country through his scholarly papers in the late 1800s, he was way ahead of his time. His findings were closely intertwined with the idea of freedom, not only from the shackles of the colonial rule but also a life brimming with poverty. The same view was voiced throughout the freedom struggle and underlined in the National Planning Commission's recommendations. The framers of our Constitution were extremely cognizant of the fact that they needed to ensure citizens not just a life sans poverty but the foundation of an inclusive society that helps them lead a dignified life. However, the pressing question that we must ask ourselves is, where do we stand today?



Naghma Mulla

The Ground Reality



- Out of the total population living in rural India, around 25.7 per cent of them are living below the poverty line, according to the RBI
- The situation becomes even worse in the rural areas of Chhattisgarh and Jharkhand where around 45 per cent of the population live below the poverty line
- Urban India projects a slightly better figure with around 13.7 per cent of the population living below the poverty line
- Altogether, around 22 per cent of the Indian population is carrying out its livelihood, while being below the poverty line
- Complexities of caste, class and gender further compound the woeful consequences of poverty and deprivation

COVID-19: A rude shock for Migrant Communities

India reported its first coronavirus positive case at the end of January this year. As time progressed, the number of cases started to rise exponentially across the country. In a highly populous country, home to around 1.3 billion people, the imposition of a complete nationwide lockdown to flatten the curve was perhaps a plausible solution. However, the announcement came as a rude shock to contractual labourers, daily wage migrant workers and their families who saw their worlds crumbling around them. Exacerbating the existing inequalities, the economic disruptions caused by COVID-19 is pushing millions of Indians into poverty and eroding the hard-fought gains made in the past two decades, according to the World Bank Group.

As many as 400 million Indians, including migrant workers and daily wage earners, are at risk of being pushed deeper into poverty because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the International Labour Organization (ILO) has recently stated in an alarming forecast.

The Exodus Back Home



Interestingly, a little less than half of India's population continues to be engaged in agricultural and allied activities. Most of the labour force is a part of the informal sector, which is possibly the primary cause behind the broadening economic chasm between the citizens of the country. The unregulated informal sector is characterised by no job security, unfair wages, a massive influx of low-skilled workers and routine exploitation. The majority of migrant labourers live far away from their homes and work contractual positions in big cities for sustenance. The lockdown snowballed their already existing problems into unthinkable misery. Having lost the means of livelihood, their meagre savings also started to eventually wither away.



With the cloud of uncertainty looming large over their lives, these families were pushed towards the dismal pit of poverty. It fuelled a reverse migration of these families into their Home States who ventured out on foot. These families had no choice left than to overlook precautionary measures, embarking on journeys of some thousands of kilometres with small children without any arrangements for food, water or accommodation. Physical distancing, hand washing and other measure are still a luxury that most of them cannot afford.

India's Rs 20 Lakh Crore COVID relief package was amongst the largest in the world. This mega package accounts for 10 per cent of India's GDP and includes Rs 1.7 Lakh Crore package of free foodgrains to the poor and cash to poor women and elderly.

Bearing the Disproportionate Brunt

In the face of adversities like the current one, why only those at the fringes of the society always bear the disproportionate brunt? The Central and State Governments are pooling together all their resources to mitigate the situation through fiscal packages, economic stimuli, Public Distribution System (PDS) and other relief entitlements.

But are the effects of this relief package trickling down to those who are genuinely in need? The widespread lack of awareness of government schemes further complicates the problem. Very often, families have no clarity on how to avail the benefits of government policies. The Public Distribution system often fails to cater to even those with a ration card. Relief is a far cry for families that aren't registered with the PDS or welfare boards of states doling out these welfare schemes. As most of these migrant families left abruptly and unprepared, they were greeted with sour faces by the people of their villages. This is where the role of Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) becomes



essential to supplement the State's relief initiatives and to also address and fill in the gaps wherever necessary.

- India's unemployment rate climbed to a staggering 27.1 per cent in the week ended May 3, and some 121.5 million Indians were out of jobs in April as India continues to be on a lockdown mode to prevent the spread of COVID-19, showed data from the Centre for Monitoring of Indian Economy.
- The latest Indian Periodic Labour Force Survey (2018-19) showed only 47.2 per cent of urban male workers and about 55 per cent of urban female workers were regular wages or salaried employees.

The Migrants Resilience Collaborative



Fighting against time, it is paramount that we collectively manoeuvre towards a rapid solution that will have a far-reaching impact. This brings me to an audacious dream, one of bringing together the best of the non-profit, philanthropic, and private sector to form the Migrants Resilience Collaborative (MRC).

"Though the Migrants Resilience Collaborative, we hope to enable access to entitlements and responsible recruitment for our migrant workers, alongside strengthening initiatives towards their welfare and protection. At EdelGive Foundation, we are committed to supporting the collaborative and urge others to join us in our mission to support this community further."

-Vidya Shah, Chairperson and CEO, EdelGive Foundation



This Collaborative is India's largest grassroots-led collaborative, and largest non-governmental initiative dedicated to migrant workers and their families. With Jan Sahas at the centre and EdelGive Foundation and Global Development Incubator (GDI) as strategic partners, MRC aims to support 10 million workers and their families in 100 districts and cities over the next five years. We will also focus on the following outcomes at scale:

- Delivering social security entitlements
- Providing access to responsible recruitment
- Strengthening tracking, worker protections, welfare, and redressal

We plan to mobilise and deploy this powerful collaborative consisting of:

- 50+ CBOs, CSOs, and worker-led groups, multiple partnerships with Central and State Government departments
- 25+ large companies and industry associations in the construction and textiles sectors
- Partnerships with other national and regional civil society initiatives



"The Migrants Resilience Collaborative is a programme that brings together the private and the social sector with governments and works towards the dignity, economic security and safe migration of migrant workers in the country."

- Ashif Shaikh CEO, Jan Sahas

With this initiative, we hope to chart a new path, with a firm resolve to help our fellow citizens out of the cycle of poverty and bring about a positive difference in their lives. We strongly urge fellow citizens to join us in our mission to support this community further.

Naghma Mulla is President and Chief Operating Officer, EdelGive Foundation. She has been instrumental in driving the mission of the organisation towards creating asymmetrical impact across the project areas. She is also associated with several not-for-profits in different capacities. She has been a Director at Railway Children India and a mentor at the Nadathur S. Raghavan Centre for Entrepreneurial Learning in Bangalore, providing support to start-ups.
