



The Long Walk Home: The Covid-19 Triggered Migration of India's Migrant Workers From The Cities To Their Homes

By Yagnya Valkya Misra

I saw their faces through the frame of my car window – sunburnt, sad, and tired. Many carried their belongings stuffed in woven plastic sacks on their shoulders and on top of their heads – men, women and children – families, hundreds of them – a river of humanity flowing on the road. As I had to get medicines for my diabetic father, I had managed to acquire a 'Lockdown Pass' to travel to the city from the outskirts where I lived. One of the police personnel at the check post, his face covered in a N95 mask walked up to me, checked my ID and the pass. He beckoned me to move on. I asked him if I can give a lift to some of these laborers walking home. He shook his head. I zig-zagged my way past the police barricades and drove slowly past the streak of people trudging on the road. The sun was almost overhead, burning the pitch on the road, creating a simmering mirage in the distance into which these people continued to walk. I continued at a slow pace, still affected by their plight. Many of them turned to look at me, as they walked – a young boy among them. Our gaze met. I stopped my car and stepped outside, calling out to the boy and his parents. I gestured to them to come close and asked why they are walking in the heat of the day. The boy could get a

sunstroke. I took out my bottle from the car and offered to the boy, who grabbed it and emptied the water into his parched throat. His mother, wrapped in a colorful silk saree, her face covered by the tail-end of the saree, lowered the baby-girl she was carrying on one side of her body. She took a sip of water and made the baby-girl drink some. Soon, other walkers huddled around me asking for the liquid. The bottle was empty, with many unable to quench their thirst. I felt helpless. I asked them why they had to travel and not stay put somewhere until the lockdown was over. They said they had little money with them. They were daily wagers. They had no savings. No money to buy food for the uncertain lockdown period. If they don't get back to work again, they cannot survive. After all they were migrant workers. Outsiders, to this place, who now had no money to pay for their food, house rent and bills. Their landlords were abusing them, asking them to leave. And, the only place they could return when they had nowhere to go, was their homes. At least, they had a roof over their heads – a place from where they wouldn't be asked to leave.

For all of these migrant laborers, walking back home seemed the only feasible solution to survive this unimagined crisis brought about by Coronavirus. Yet, the homes of these workers lay hundreds of miles away from their present location. Still, they believed they would reach home, safe and healthy, by continuing to walk, eating what they could get, and sleeping where they could lie down.

I waved at the boy, as he tagged along with his family, turning repeatedly to look at me.

Later that day, as I drove back home on the near-empty road, I glanced at the sun sinking towards the horizon in the distance. There was hardly a soul to be found. Mother Nature, albeit briefly, had rid itself of the two-legged animals swarming over her body for years.

The tired face of the boy I offered water in the morning still danced in my thoughts, as I parked my car in the parking lot. What had he eaten? Where was he sleeping? Will he be able to make the long walk back to his home?

I rang the doorbell. My wife opened the door. My three-year-old son ran towards me. I gestured them to wait. I rushed to the bathroom, where I put all my clothes in a soapy bucket of water, had a shower and put on fresh clothes. All of these, the Coronavirus cleaning protocol. I sat with my family to eat. I watched as my wife stuffed a spoonful of rice into my son's mouth. He continued to watch Spiderman fight Hulk on YouTube as he gulped down the food. For him, the virus and the subsequent quarantine was simply a change of routine – a license to consume gigabytes of cartoons and entertaining media on my wife's smartphone, because he was not allowed outside and had no outdoor activity to do.

Yet, for the likes of the migrant boy and his family, Covid-19 was a curse, which deprived them of their livelihood. A walk back into an uncertain future, out of which, how soon they can come out of, is a question very few can answer at the moment.

I walked to the apartment balcony and stared into the darkness of the space outside. I knew there was a road there somewhere, but it wasn't visible in the absence of light.

