After the long marches: What do workers want?

A preliminary survey

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Chinmayi Naik
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About WPC

The Working Peoples Charter (WPC) is a coalition of organisations working on issues related to informal labour in particular, and labour in general. Initially, the charter was formed with a focus on Lok Sabha Elections of 2014, to make parliamentarians accountable for the demands of informal workers, related to social security, conditions at work, the security of tenure, right to organise and minimum wages. WPC has now emerged with a wider network of an alliance in about 20 states, with focus on eight core areas: Minimum Wages, Social Security, Labour Administration, Labour Law Reform, Right to Work, Workers Housing, Bonded Labour and Migrant Workers. The charter’s key objective is to advocate, negotiate and implement key demands of the informal workers in labour policy, and make is successful. The work also includes an understanding and engagement with citizenship, sustainable development, and the city.

The WPC is supported by a large number of academics, journalists, lawyers, other professionals and broader civil society organisations.

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Since the first case of COVID-19 was detected in India in February, the Indian economy has been battered and bruised by the cumulative effects of the spread of the virus and the policy measures adopted to combat it. The announcement of the nationwide lockdown led to a huge exodus of migrants from big cities back to villages and small towns spread out across India, with images of hardship and untold misery dominating media and television screens nationwide.

The pandemic continues unabated across the country, and economic growth has reduced sharply. With a large number of migrant workers – the lifeblood of the economy – back in their homes, concerns have been raised across a different number of subjects. The lack of livelihood opportunities and effective policy interventions in villages and rural areas have meant unimaginable hardship for a large number of people. Work from the Centre of Sustainable Employment at Azim Premji University has outlined the difficult and precarious situation of people during the lockdown (Kesar, et al. 2020).

The other significant problem facing the Indian economy is the prospects of growth going forward. With a significant amount of uncertainty regarding the virus, and economic growth collapsing, it would require effective policy interventions on the economic front to restart economic growth. But it would take more than liquidity interventions and standard tools of fiscal and monetary policy to restart growth; with a large section of the labour force back home in their villages, economic growth can only restart if migrant labour is willing to come back to cities and resume work.

This report presents a survey of around 132 workers across some of the major states in India, states that account for a significant majority of migrant’s labour in the country. Respondents consist of migrant labour that has returned home from the big cities as a result of the lockdown. This survey aimed to examine whether there have been changes in the decision of migrant workers to return to cities in order to find work.

One of the major findings of this report is the fact that close to 30% of workers in our sample have expressed a desire not to return to cities to find work and would take up NREGA work or any other sort of work instead of migrating back. This report is well aware of the danger in extrapolating this result to the entire country. For one, the sample size is relatively small – only 132 workers were interviewed. Moreover,

Introduction
as the weeks and months go by, and livelihood opportunities may dry up in workers’ hometowns, all those workers who said that they would not return to the city might rethink their decision and migrate due to necessity.

However, this study aims to highlight the dangers in assuming that things would return to normal following the pandemic and when economic activity is allowed to resume. It cannot be taken for granted that workers would return immediately when economic conditions improve. Even though a majority of workers in our sample have expressed a desire to return, a 30% reduction in labour supply – if it were to occur – would serve as a significant constraint on the ability of the economy to expand.

Moreover, even amongst those workers who wish to return, this report highlights how their decision to return is conditional on the virus being controlled, and the chances of infection reducing. A significant majority of workers, who otherwise wished to return, said that they would come back to the cities only when things got better with respect to the virus. All things considered, this survey indicates that in the near future, a policy cannot assume that migrant workers would return to the cities in the same numbers as before.

What this report also indicates is that there is no distinction between a robust policy of public health, and one aimed at economic expansion. This distinction had been drawn in the context of the lockdown, where it was argued that stringent measures were needed in the midst of a global pandemic, while others have argued that economic activity cannot be choked in a way that causes hardships to millions.

Our survey seems to indicate that the two policies – of public health and economic policy – should not be thought of as mutually exclusive. Bringing the spread of the virus under control would go a long way in ensuring conditions are safe enough to convince workers to return. Economic activity cannot attain normalcy when both consumers and workers are worried and make decisions under a situation of profound uncertainty.

It is imperative that economic policy in the aftermath of the pandemic takes account of the fact that workers’ rights cannot – and must not – be sacrificed at the altar of increasing economic growth. The right to a safe working environment and protection from infection is not just a basic human right that must be adhered to, it is also necessary to ensure that workers would feel safe and confident enough to return to the cities. In the absence of such measures, cities in India might face a significant shortage of labour.

No one can accurately predict what changes might happen in the Indian economy going forward, caught as we are in such uncertain times. The return of migrants back home in such large numbers would have significant changes in labour patterns, economic growth, and political relations in rural and urban areas. This survey is a small step in that direction, to understand the likely patterns of change that we might be faced with in a strange, uncertain new normal.
Migration, the movement of people within a country/state/district, is an important feature of Indian labour markets. In a technical, instrumental sense, migration improves the efficiency of allocation of labour in a market economy, by ensuring labour flows from where it is less needed to areas where it is in high demand. Similarly, it can improve the livelihood opportunities for skilled as well as unskilled workers, by allowing them to earn greater than what they would have earned back in their hometowns or villages. However, the modern economy, while making full use of the huge supply of labour moving from rural to urban areas, has failed miserably in providing safety and security to the migrants in urban areas. The stringent lockdowns announced by the government have led to significant disruptions in the economy, and have brought the issue of migrant labour into mainstream discourse. Images of workers walking hundreds of kilometres to reach home – with few of them dying in the process - have become some of the defining images of our current situation.

As per the Census data of 2001, the number of migrants was around 315 million, which increased to 450 million in 2011. This implies that around 82 million people every year left their hometown and moved to a different state or district in the hope of a better future. Major origin states for interstate migration were Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Bihar, Rajasthan, Jharkhand, and Odisha, accounting for almost 30 million migrants (Table 1). The major destination states for these migrants were Delhi, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala. These migration flows reveal the uneven development pattern across the country.

The origin states are commonly characterized by very low social and economic development. Therefore, most of the times the migration flow
is more of a permanent or semi-permanent in nature. But various studies have revealed the predominance of seasonal or circular migration in construction, textile, brick kiln and agricultural industries. These circular migrants, in particular, pose the challenge of integration due to data gaps in migration flows and systematic accounting of their experiences. While permanent migration flows tend to be male-dominated, circular migration, which is prevalent in the poorest and tribal regions, tend to have balanced gender dynamics. But regardless of the duration of stay, migrant labourers face myriad challenges from restricted access to basic needs to political exclusion and harassment.

Despite an impressive economic growth rate of India in the last decade, a vast number of people are still not able to secure a meaningful livelihood. In 2010, 30% of the population was still living below the poverty line. In terms of the remittances of migrants to families, only 9% of the migrants were able to send more than Rs 10,000/- back home. More than half of the migrant population were able to send less than Rs 7500/- to their families and almost 15% of them could not even manage to save the money to send back home (CDFI, 2018). The magnitude of the migrant’s distress is enormous and compared to that the governments’ responses were always limited.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were already facing significant challenges, such as a lack of social security and health benefits, poor implementation of minimum safety standards, lack of state-provided benefits (food, medical) and lack of access to affordable housing and basic amenities. Migrants were also not protected under the ISMW act (Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act, 1979) due to lack of concrete and fruitful efforts from the government. Migrants were already living and working under precarious conditions prior to the lockdown, conditions which got exacerbated during the lockdown and forced millions of them to leave cities and walk back home to their villages.

Table 1: Number of migrants by origin states, Census data 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>States</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uttarakhand</td>
<td>440,303</td>
<td>628,487</td>
<td>1,068,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jharkhand</td>
<td>599,526</td>
<td>1,161,874</td>
<td>1,761,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uttar Pradesh</td>
<td>6,658,335</td>
<td>6,336,339</td>
<td>12,994,674</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bihar</td>
<td>4,154,666</td>
<td>3,795,187</td>
<td>7,949,853</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajasthan</td>
<td>1,619,163</td>
<td>2,330,114</td>
<td>3,949,277</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Odisha</td>
<td>642,538</td>
<td>704,816</td>
<td>1,347,354</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>14,114,531</td>
<td>14,956,817</td>
<td>29,071,348</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Migrants classified by sex, Census data 2011

1 The World Bank - Poverty & Equity Data Portal (http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/country/IND)
The sample consists of 132 individuals, 123 men and 9 women, with interviews carried out between the 8th of June and the 11th of July. The average age of respondents was 31 years of age, with the youngest being 18 and the oldest being 58. Nearly 25% of individuals in the sample were below 25 years, while 45% were between the ages of 26 to 35.

### Findings

In terms of education, a majority of the respondents – 72 out of 132 – did not complete 12th standard, with 36 out of 132 not having completed 5th standard, and 19 illiterate workers.

Workers from 7 states were interviewed, with the maximum number of workers coming from Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Jharkhand, with 35 workers interviewed from the former and 30 from the latter. 20 were interviewed from Bihar and 27 from Rajasthan, while 2 each were interviewed from Maharashtra and Telangana. 15 workers were interviewed from Odisha.

A significant majority of workers in the sample owned little to no land in their hometown. 45 workers reported owning no land, while 59 reported owning less than 0.5 acres. This could have serious implications on the ability...
of workers to sustain themselves in their hometown and might serve as a factor pushing them to go back to the city.

The maximum number of workers worked in Mumbai (35). The other big cities which accounted for a majority of the workers in the sample were Chennai (13), Ahmedabad (8) and Pune (8). In terms of the work they did, out of 132 workers in the sample, 38 workers were in construction, 34 in manufacturing and 17 were in personal service, i.e they worked either as domestic work, or drivers etc, while the rest were in a number of different service occupations.

The average range of wages that workers in the sample earned pre-lockdown was between Rs 10000 to Rs 15000, with 52 workers reporting earnings in this range. 46 workers earned between Rs 8000 to Rs 10000, with 12 workers earning more than Rs 15000 a month. The rest earned lesser than Rs 8000.
Respondents were asked questions regarding their experiences in the city during the lockdown and the factors motivating their decisions to leave. Out of 120 workers who responded to this question, 78 of them reported staying in cities for more than a month after lockdown, while 19 stayed for lesser than a month, and 23 stayed for less than 2 weeks. The major reason motivating their decision to leave was the loss of income and cessation of work; 38 workers reported leaving due to fears of catching the virus, the rest reporting that income shortfalls and the inability to meet basic expenditure motivated them to leave. 72 workers reported returning home through government-assisted means – presumably the trains – while the remaining reported returning through some means of private transport. The average amount paid to trucks to ferry workers home seems to be around Rs 5000 per person.

With regard to schemes offered by the government at migrants’ hometowns, a majority of workers reported that the government had not provided much help for the returnees. Only NREGA work seemed to be available, with only 2 respondents reporting awareness of other forms of government assistance, such as free food grains. Only 37 workers out of the sample of 132 individuals tried accessing NREGA in their hometown. The largest share of respondents who have accessed NREGA seem to have come from Rajasthan; out of the 37 workers who accessed NREGA, 22 of them were from Rajasthan. The total number of respondents from Rajasthan was 27.
Migrant workers who had returned home were asked whether they would, at some point of time in the future, leave home to seek work in the city. While 91 migrants said that they would leave at some point of time in the future, the remaining 39 workers said that they did not wish to return to the city and would prefer to look for work in their hometown. Interestingly, 5 out of the 39 said that they wished to return, but their families would not allow them to do so. The number of workers who did not wish to return to cities formed around 30% of the total sample. There is a very real possibility that the proportion of workers who currently report their desire to stay back might rethink their decision as the weeks and months go by. However, these results do indicate that the Indian economy might face a significant labour shortage and cannot necessarily take the return of migrants for granted.

What are the demographic characteristics of those who wished to stay back? Out of 9 women in the sample, only 1 reported wishing to return to the city (one woman did not record an answer to this question). The number of women recorded in this sample is no doubt small, making it difficult to draw robust conclusions as to the preferences and behaviour of women workers. However, it is a cause for concern that such a large proportion of female workers report not wanting to return to cities. If this finding is found to be significant with respect to the behaviour of women workers, it could have serious repercussions with respect to the dynamics of female migrant labour. Indian cities might see a huge reduction in the number of women migrants following the pandemic. With regards to males, 27% of workers did not wish to return to the city.
The fear of the virus was the single most significant factor motivating workers to remain back in their villages. Out of 25 workers who responded, 14 reported staying back in their villages due to the fear of the virus, while 6 reported that the response of the government made them wish to stay back rather than returning to the city.

According to the sample, workers who wished to return were younger than those who wished to stay; the average age of those workers who wished to return was around 30, while that of those who wished to stay back was around 34 (the median ages were 29 and 33 respectively). But this is also because of the nature of the sample, which was largely made up of younger respondents.

Within the younger age groups – largely for workers from the age of 18 to 35 – the preference seemed to be to return the city. Figure 14 shows the distribution of responses within each age group. Nearly three-quarters of respondents in the younger age groups – 18 to 25 and 26 to 35 – showed a preference to return to the city. But in the older age groups, the gap between the two groups of respondents narrows, to the extent that a majority of older workers – those older than 46 – showed a preference to stay back in their hometown.

Out of the total number of workers who did not wish to return, a majority of them were from UP – nearly 37%. Amongst the states with the largest number of respondents, UP and Odisha showed the maximum number of
workers who did not wish to return; 7 out of 15 workers from Odisha and 15 out of 35 workers from UP revealed their preference for staying back in their hometowns.

It was not just the lowest-paid workers who wished to go back. 17 workers out of the 40 did not wish to return earned – prior to the lockdown – wages within the range of Rs 10000 to Rs 15000. These are workers with significantly much to lose, yet they still do not wish to leave their hometown to go back to the city.

17 workers – out of 40 – who did not wish to return were from the manufacturing sector, while 6 were from construction. This is significant, for a majority (nearly 84%) of construction workers reported wishing to return, while only 48% of workers from manufacturing desired to return. If, as is mentioned, these results are indicative of a nation-wide trend, it might be the case that the construction industry would not face any real shortage of labour, but manufacturing would be significantly affected.

It is quite possible, too, that the city of Mumbai would be severely affected; out of a total of 35 workers who worked in Mumbai before lockdown, only 20 expressed a willingness to return.

It is an extremely worrying situation that workers who do not return to the city face. Amongst those who expressed a desire to stay back, a majority – 18 – did not own any land, while 14 owned less than 0.5 acres. When asked what they would wish to do in their hometowns, they reported being willing to seek some sort of work, take up agriculture, or take up NREGA work (2 respondents reported wishing to do only domestic work). It might be the case that these workers would eventually return to the city when the lack of livelihood opportunities in the village becomes too much to bear; however, their return cannot be taken for granted. When
asked what measures would need to be taken to convince them to return, out of 25 workers who responded, 7 required better wages, while 11 said some sort of guarantee with regards to safety needed to be given. This is significant because a majority of workers who do not wish to return – but who could be convinced to return – are asking for health interventions to be able to return to work, indicating that policy should not necessarily be thinking of trade-offs between controlling the virus and economic growth. Ensuring workers would not be infected would serve as an important policy intervention to ensure the return of workers to cities. Ensuring a safe working environment is not just a matter of workers’ rights and basic guarantees a humane, welfare-driven society should focus on, it would also provide a strong foundation to enable the resumption of economic activity in the future.
As mentioned before, a significant majority of workers expressed a desire to return. These workers tended to be largely male, and younger. As outlined above, a significant proportion of those in construction wished to return, but not those in manufacturing.

However, one significant area of concern is the fact that all workers did not report a willingness to return to work immediately. Out of the 90 workers who desired to return to the city for work, only 20 (22% of the total) expressed a willingness to return as soon as possible. While 40 workers expressed some sort of timeline for their return – ranging from one month to six months – 50 workers left the timeline indefinite. 11 workers reported willing to return only when job prospects would improve, while 39 workers reported willing to return only if things were to get better with respect to the spread of the virus.

This indicates that even when workers are willing to return, their return cannot be taken for granted. It also indicates that the dichotomy between economic growth and control of the pandemic is a false one; the fact that so many workers’ decisions to return are predicated on controlling the virus means that if economic growth is to resume in a sustainable, healthy manner, there must be a huge public health effort to control the spread of the pandemic.

With respect to sectors of work, it was seen that a majority of workers in the construction sector were willing to return to work, with manufacturing workers preferring to stay back. However, as shown in Figure 23, out of those workers who said that they would be willing to return, in construction and manufacturing, a majority of workers said that they would return only when things get better with respect to control of the virus. With respect to workers in other forms of work, a greater proportion said that they would return within the next 6 months. However, a significant number of these workers also said that they would be willing to return only when things got better with respect to finding work.
One aspect that might gain in importance as the economy slowly opens up is whether there might be changes in migration patterns. Out of the 90 workers who did wish to return, 74 reported a willingness to return to their original destination of work, while 11 reported searching for a change in working destination. The remaining said they would return to their former places of work only if their bosses called them back. 7 out of these 11 said that they would search for work in a different city, while 4 said they would look for work closer to home. The pandemic, and the resultant exodus of migrant workers, would have a significant impact on the prospects of economic growth in the future.
The pandemic – and the nationwide lockdown called in order to combat it – have had a devastating effect on livelihoods across the country, as has been shown in several studies. The return of migrants from cities has meant a large loss of income and serious food insecurities. There has been a call from many quarters to open up livelihood opportunities, while simultaneously controlling the spread of the virus.

However, as has been shown, the responses of many migrants indicate that there might not exist any trade-off between public health and the economy. A significant proportion of workers report that they might not be willing to return to the village; if the results of this survey are successful in capturing the sentiments of migrants nationwide, then there would be a huge fall in the number of migrant workers returning to cities, and this would have a significant impact on economic growth.

Moreover, even those workers who do wish to return, not all of them indicate a willingness to return immediately and would prefer to return either when economic conditions improve, or more significant when the virus has been brought under control. Public health and economic growth will only go together, and cannot be thought of as two discrete outcomes. What is required is an improvement in working conditions as well as a concerted public health program to get the virus under control. Workers are well aware that a return to work would imply a danger of getting exposed to the virus, and the fear of infection is a major concern. On both grounds of workers’ rights, as well as on more instrumental grounds of speeding up economic activity, the spread of the pandemic must be tamed. If this is done, it would incentivise many more workers to return from their villages to their places of work.

It is true that things might change with respect to workers’ decisions as time goes on, and the livelihood pressures might cause many workers to change their mind and return to work. But it is also true that if the spread of the virus remains unchecked, and local lockdowns continue to be called, many more might change their decision to return in the first place. Policy-makers must work to check the spread of the pandemic if they desire a return to economic normalcy.
Appendix

On April 15, 2020, the Ministry of Home Affairs issued an order allowing select activities to be restarted from April 20th onwards. This included activities related to the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act or NREGA. Since the partial lifting of the lockdown in some parts of the country, various state governments have started NREGA activities in some measure, mostly related to agricultural works.

As migrant workers across the country return to their villages, rural India’s dependence on NREGA wages for survival is expected to increase manifold. But drawing on our experience while conducting interviews of returnees from states such as Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Odisha and Jharkhand, Design, scope and implementation of NREGA requires some immediate changes to effectively reduce the economic aftershocks induced by the pandemic.

Following are some of the issues experienced by the returnees while accessing NREGA:

**Job cards:**
Returned workers do not have job cards to access the work in NREGA as they were working in different states. In a few cases, job cards were in the custody of middlemen, which was another major barrier to access the work. Also among the registered, more than 33% of the workers have not got employment. Of the 6.4 crore workers registered as of June 6, 2.2 crore workers have not got jobs. The workers in Bihar have got the least employment through NREGA. Of the 31.1 lakh people who registered, only 17.7 lakh people have got employment through the scheme in the state. That leaves 43% of people (13.4 crores) who are yet to find employment. This is followed by Odisha and Uttar Pradesh, where 38% of those who have enrolled have not got employment. In Odisha, of the 28.4 lakh people who registered, 17.5 lakh people have got jobs through NREGA, while in Uttar Pradesh of the 77 lakh who registered, 29 lakh people are yet to get employment. At 77 lakh, Uttar Pradesh has the highest number of employee registrations for NREGA work. (Mathew 2020)

**Wages:**
When the PM Garib Kalyan Yojana was announced, it included a relief measure for NREGA workers: The daily-wage rate would be increased from Rs 182 per day to Rs 202 per day, effective April 1, 2020. However, migrants have reported that they have better income opportunities (Rs 350-500 per day) in other states than working in NREGA. Therefore, around 75% of the respondents are looking forward to going back to the same place where they worked before lockdown.

**Skill gap**
NREGA’s scope of work is limited to the agricultural activities or maintenance works related to dams, canals and forests. Whereas, the majority of returnees are skilled in construction, Manufacturing and domestic service (electrician, tailor, nurse or pharmacy etc.) sector. Therefore, in the situation of COVID 19 demands extension of the Employment Guarantee Act to include the skilled workers in different sectors impacted by the pandemic.
There is a wide range of migrants - some may be daily wagers, some changing their occupations seasonally and many operating in the economy of the poor. There will also be migrants with very specialised skills. Their returning or not returning to cities may not simply be based on their experiences during the lockdown. It may be a short-term factor. Much desired would be if they get employment closer to their native places, but the important question that also needs attention is availability of jobs, wages and development pattern in smaller towns and cities?

Case of Rajasthan:

Aajeevika Bureau has been actively working in different villages/districts of Rajasthan to provide assistance and support to the returned migrants from different states. Their experiences while assisting workers under MGNREGA with help of different civil societies and unions is as follows,

- NREGA was providing work in the main three sectors - agriculture, road infrastructure, and housing.
- The area under the forest department has very little work and has failed to provide jobs due to lack of proper issuance of job cards.
- There was a demand for NREGA in the time of lockdown i.e. April and May, especially immediately after returning to the native place. But this demand declined, especially amongst men, after different industries slowly restored their work.
- Less number of men were choosing to work in NREGA due to low wages and skill gaps. At the same time, around 90% of women workers are working under the same conditions.
- Even though the state has announced Rs 220/- per day for NREGA, but migrants were getting Rs 120 -130/- per day.
- Different agencies are trying to push the government to increase the number of workdays from 100 to 200 but currently, returnees had work.
- Implementing agencies are distributing wages by calculating completed work but they do not have enough capacity as well as a proper framework to carry out the calculations. Therefore, workers are getting their payment 1 or 2 weeks after completing the work.

Even though Rajasthan has seen an increase in demand for work as well as an increase in the supply of work through different sectors such as infrastructure and housing, still a lot of migrants, especially men, are waiting to return to the states where they used to work as soon as possible.