



CENJOWS

SOCIAL SCIENCE OF PANDEMIC: REVERSE MIGRATION AND SOCIAL SECURITY IS THE WAY TO GO

By

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The country witnessed the plight of daily wage earners in the aftermath of sudden lockdown of entire nation in pursuit of containing afflictions of Wuhan virus. A disease brought to India by travelers from foreign shores, but the catastrophe fell on the poor and hapless families who live on the margins. The source of their income vanished all of a sudden and the employers threw them out to cut their costs. The landlords started haunting them to pay up, or leave to safe guard their premises suspecting irretrievable encroachments by such unwanted occupants.

The decision of lockdown was correct and a tough call, but it ignored the magnanimity of human suffering it could cause. The government machinery did not seem to be prepared and found wanting in handling the situation, initially. With no source of income, shelter and food they had no choice but to rush back to safety of their homes back in the villages for their survival. In absence of trains, buses and any transport of their own, few of them set out on foot to slog it out to cover hundreds of kilometers. Government did response to muster up some transport looking at the enormity of the problem which they had failed to appreciate earlier.

There was a flurry of patchwork announcements to make arrangements for the migrants to stop their exodus fearing spread of the disease due to absence of social distancing by such large congregations of human beings.

Given the perception of inefficiency of the government machinery, these marginal people apparently had no confidence in the purported measures. As a result, millions of citizen of this country continue to be stranded and spread all over surviving on the doles by the government & some good Samaritans.

There are lessons to be learnt from the fallouts of the decision by the government for the larger benefit of the countrymen. To start with, there appears to be lack of connect with the ground realities and culture of contingency planning at the executive level. Though **the government officials have been performing their tasks beyond call of duty, the picture would have been better, had there been a plan in place.** The current crisis appears to be settling down as most of the affected are being taken care of as per government claims. With such large number of people spread all over, it is understandable that despite best of intentions there are bound to be some slippages.

This episode has surely created a fear psychosis amongst the poor of the country that they will be left high and dry if such a disaster happens again. There would be an obvious **reluctance on their part to return** and run the factories, businesses and service sector of all hues once the lock down is over. It would have negative impact on the economy, employment and consequent social harmony. There is a lot to be done to repair the damage and restore the confidence of the public in our institutions of governance. **Employment, social security and capacity building for crisis response are three major challenges** thrown up by the current crisis which need utmost indulgence of the policy makers.

The social security in Indian rural environment lies in the comfort of the home in the villages. These people from farmers' stock venture out from their homes as a compulsion to earn living due to ever shrinking land holding plus **lack of avenues of employment** locally. It has a cascading effect on landless service providers in the villages forcing them also to migrate to the towns seeking small time jobs. Large numbers of them join the bands of seasonal labourers venturing out to distant lands across the country. **It is this segment of 'Bharat' which is most deprived and neglected in the otherwise much acclaimed success story of 'India shinning'.**

The remedy lies in **decreasing the physical distance of employment avenues from the catchment areas** of the work force to the maximum

possible extent. It warrants **relocating part of the industry from urban to the rural areas**, alongside **making agriculture sector more lucrative** to check the current migration trends. In present day scenario most of the interior areas are connected by roads and have power & digital linkages. Therefore, it should not be a major restricting factor anymore for shifting the selected industries away from urban areas.

There exists a mindset amongst the urban industrial elite that rural based workers lack the requisite skill sets for high tech industrial operations. Whereas, the ground situation is changing very fast with spread of education and skill development structures even in the interiors. There exists a reservoir of talented and motivated youth in the rural areas that can be groomed to give their best to the industry. **The apprehensions of higher logistics costs would be more than compensated with the lower overheads and harmonious industrial environment.** Conceptually, it is a win-win model for Indian socio-economic environment and should be encouraged to be implemented in national interests.

The government may consider restricting further proliferation of new industries in the urban areas **unless there are compulsions of strategic import.** The government has already developed few industrial areas away from the towns, but these are mostly located astride main high ways. Developing new industrial parks further into the hinterland would benefit the rural population immensely. The **'Make in India'** mission of the government may well include **'Make in Interiors of India'** as one of its sub sets.

The government may like to provide incentives in terms of improving existing infrastructure, uninterrupted power supply, tax holidays and subsidies to motivate the new entrepreneurs to establish industries in rural areas. The Industry will benefit immensely with more satisfied and secure work force instead of families living away from their homes in cramped up dwellings with existential insecurities of all kinds. **Such a policy would create additional jobs closer to home for the rural youth resulting in reverse migration.**

The **format of agriculture based economy also needs a paradigm shift in its construct**, in order to make it more attractive. In current system, other than food production, all other associated economic activities are handled by the businessmen making handsome profits leaving pittance to the farmers. This dynamics has to change. The traditional system of farmers selling their produce individually needs to be changed to a cooperative marketing at village level to avert exploitation by the wily middlemen. It is time to **make the farmer as the lead partner of the agro products supply chain.**

Management of transport, warehouses, cold storage, distribution, supply and retail handling may gradually be shifted to the farmer owned cooperatives. Each of these connected activities would have a large scope of employment of rural youth. Besides this, other small and medium labour intensive industries like furniture, construction utilities, pottery, garments, ceramics, steel work, toys, dying & printing etc may be easily shifted to the rural industrial clusters.

The seasonal migration of agricultural and construction labour from impoverish states to affluent areas takes place every year. It is a highly neglected sector which needs sovereign protection in unforeseen adverse contingencies like it happened recently. The concept of minimum daily wages has to be made more humanitarian as the present compensation is too meager and exploitative in content. **It needs to include reasonable allowances for essential social security factors at par with the organized sector to accord human dignity to individuals.** Hence, there is a need of a statutory legislation by the government to provide fair deal to such a migrant manpower for the duration of their seasonal employment.

The disastrous situations may also manifest due to **hybrid variants of cyber, space, nuclear, biological and chemical warfare**, besides natural calamities. The scenario would be somewhat similar as experienced in the current worldwide bioterrorism like Corona affliction. The present crisis has also highlighted the need of **capacity building of structures of social security in such war like situations.** This gap needs to be covered up lest we lose out on pace of economic development and consequent national strategic buoyancy.

The district being the basic unit of administration needs to be structurally empowered to accommodate and feed the displaced and deprived populations under their jurisdiction. Similarly, all the government departments need to work out adverse case scenarios and establish processes and systems so as to continue discharging their assigned duties. The government needs to have full grasp of likely scenarios, make budgetary provisions, procure resources and create effective command, control and communication mechanism. **Inspiring and encouraging the masses to stay calm and stable by the higher leadership putting aside their political differentials is an essential part of disaster management.**

Working out standard operation procedures (SOPs) at each level of governance is the way forward for better crisis response. A military like contingency plan for sustenance during likely duration of disruption of normal operations and supply chain may be worked out for varied situations.

It should be made mandatory for the industry also to make provisions for taking care of their workers to tide over such emergencies. Registration of all the workers and upkeep of their personal data in real time need to be made mandatory and shared with the government authorities. Similar conditions may also be laid down for the employment of casual/ seasonal labour force by the private individuals.

The Wuhan virus episode has highlighted infirmities of our systems and processes prompting us to focus on capacity building both at macro as well as micro levels to manage disaster situations. **Creating conditions for “reverse migration” by enhancing employment avenues in the rural areas, adequate compensation and social security** is the way to go for taking care of poor. It is time to provide their rightful space in economic fabric of our constitutionally enunciated welfare state sans any compromises. The industrial policies also need to be hyphenated with compulsions of socio-economic canvas and ramifications of recent disaster situation on the large migrant work force.

The catastrophe is still unfolding opening up new vistas of challenges, yet unseen. Let us join our heads to **‘treat the disease and not merely the symptoms’** seen as of now.

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