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LET'S STAND UNITED WITH PEOPLE FROM WEST BENGAL AND ODISHA!



New Series Vol. 26 No. 1-2

MAY-JUNE 2020

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The Lockdown Has Unlocked India's Suppressed Social Reality of Migrant Workers

It has now been nearly four months since the World Health Organisation warned us about the coronavirus emergency and two months since the government of India imposed a countrywide lockdown in India. China, the country of origin of the virus and also of the lockdown strategy which has shaped the overwhelming global response, albeit with considerable local variations, has more or less bid goodbye to the epidemic, as have a few other Asian countries. However, for much of the Americas and Europe and, crucially for us, India and the rest of South Asia, the epidemic is still raging strong. And if anywhere in the world the cost of lockdown has far outweighed the damage done by the epidemic, it is India. Ironically, after two months of a chaotic, clueless and cruel lockdown as India gropes for some sort of exit strategy, the epidemic continues to escalate and the promised flattening of the curve is nowhere in sight.

The world has surely witnessed more lethal viral outbreaks in the past, the 1918 Spanish Flu being one of the deadliest in modern history followed by assaults of other killer varieties like Ebola, Zika, Sars, and Nipah in more recent decades. But Covid19 has taken the whole world by surprise with the scale and speed of its spread. Coupled with the disruption caused by the lockdown, the crisis has been truly unprecedented and unthinkable. In many ways it has been a pandemic caused and exacerbated by the expansion and intensification of global capital. The mindless destruction of nature, greatly increased global travel

and migration, corporatization of agriculture, and systematic neglect of public health, all organically associated with the pattern and trajectory of globalization, have contributed to the disaster caused by the Covid19 pandemic.

As far as India is concerned, the havoc so far has been caused more by the lockdown than the epidemic. This is not to downplay the fact that the spread of the epidemic has lately increased considerably in India. In spite of our abysmally low testing rate, the number of confirmed Covid19-positive cases has now gone past one lakh, but the intensity of the epidemic has been significantly less in India than the global average. At a little above 3%, the fatality rate in India has been less than half of the global average or the rate recorded in the US, and way below the 10-20% range prevailing in several European countries. But the underprepared healthcare system in India has been pretty badly challenged by even this moderate intensity of the epidemic. Add to this the fact that many patients could not access even routine healthcare for other ailments because of the singular focus on the epidemic, and we get some idea of the Covid19 impact on India's public health situation.

The Modi government's response to the Covid19 challenge has revolved predominantly around the lockdown, which has been presented as the decisive weapon to win this battle. At the time of announcing what later turned out to be only the first phase of a prolonged lockdown, Narendra Modi told us that the country would be pushed back by 21 years if

it failed to strictly adhere to the lockdown norms for 21 days. He also reminded the people in his constituency of Varanasi, that the battle of Mahabharat was won in 18 days and the battle against Covid19 would be won in 21 days. Subsequently as the lockdown was extended, the Niti Aayog, the main official policy thinktank of the government, predicted in late April that the curve would definitely be flattened by mid-May and new cases would stop being detected by 16 May! India recorded the highest spike in cases around that time and the surge has been unstoppable, with ten thousand new cases being added every two days.

The lockdown has thus clearly failed to achieve the desired result in India. Lockdown has worked in China, where it was adopted as a limited and targeted strategy backed by the proven capacity of the Chinese state to enforce it without any leakage. Different versions of lockdown have worked in countries like Vietnam and New Zealand and several other countries where it was introduced on time and backed up by proper medical and other delivery strategies ensured by the state. All these states have been clear in their understanding that lockdown was only a way to buy time, what mattered was how that time was used to step up medical preparations and implement allied plans to contain and combat the epidemic. Viewed in this context, in India the lockdown has worked best only in Kerala as a state, and a few districts in some other states, where the emphasis of the state has been not on enforcing the lockdown but on ensuring the complementary components of the overall strategy.

The lockdown response of the Modi government has been

deficient, if not counterproductive, on all counts. Crucial time was lost in February and first three weeks of March. The government and the Sangh-BJP brigade and India's dominant media had other priorities – the 'Namaste Trump' event in Ahmedabad and regime change in Madhya Pradesh, to mention two high points of India's event-managing establishment. If they ever mentioned Covid19 during

The lockdown has thus clearly failed to achieve the desired result in India. Lockdown has worked in China, where it was adopted as a limited and targeted strategy backed by the proven capacity of the Chinese state to enforce it without any leakage. Different versions of lockdown have worked in countries like Vietnam and New Zealand and several other countries where it was introduced on time and backed up by proper medical and other delivery strategies ensured by the state.

this period, it was only to deny and downplay the threat to India. And when the government finally woke up, it only lapped up the lockdown idea as yet another shock-and-awe drill like the November 2016 demonetization, as an opportunity to unleash the spectacle of the world's biggest ever lockdown! Not a thought was spared for the people who either did not have a home of their own or would be desperate to return to places they called their homes. Not a thought was spared for the people who have to work and earn every day to even think of having two square meals.

Thus the lockdown in India has turned out to be anything but the regimented designer spectacle the regime wanted to produce punctuated by eye-catching events like the inaugural clapping and clanging, the lighting of torches and candles or the showering of rose petals from the sky. The lockdown will not be remembered for these sound and light and flower shows or the 8 PM Modi speeches and the fraudulent rhetoric of the 20 Lakh Crore package and Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan. The lockdown will not be remembered for the sudden fall in air and noise pollution, for the surreal return of the lost sounds and sights of nature and its flora and fauna that had started disappearing from our increasingly urbanized, consumerist existence. The lockdown in India will be remembered for the return of India's suppressed social reality that Modi sought to wall off during Trump's visit, the uncomfortable reality that remains invisible in the dazzling glitter of globalization, drowned in the loud drum beats of development. The lockdown will be remembered for India's migrant workers.

If the celebrated 'functional anarchy' of India continues to work it is not because of our age old civilization. It is not because of the state and its feudal-colonial power structure, its draconian laws, trigger-happy security forces and smug bureaucracy. Not because of our castes and customs, ancient faiths and modern fancies. It is the real people, millions and millions of India's working people, their never-say-die spirit and indomitable courage, that keeps India going. Even if the dominant media continue to marginalise and invisibilise them, even if the judiciary fails to recognize them as human beings with needs and

rights, they have come back with a vengeance on India's mindspace. They have emerged as the real fighters and builders of modern India.

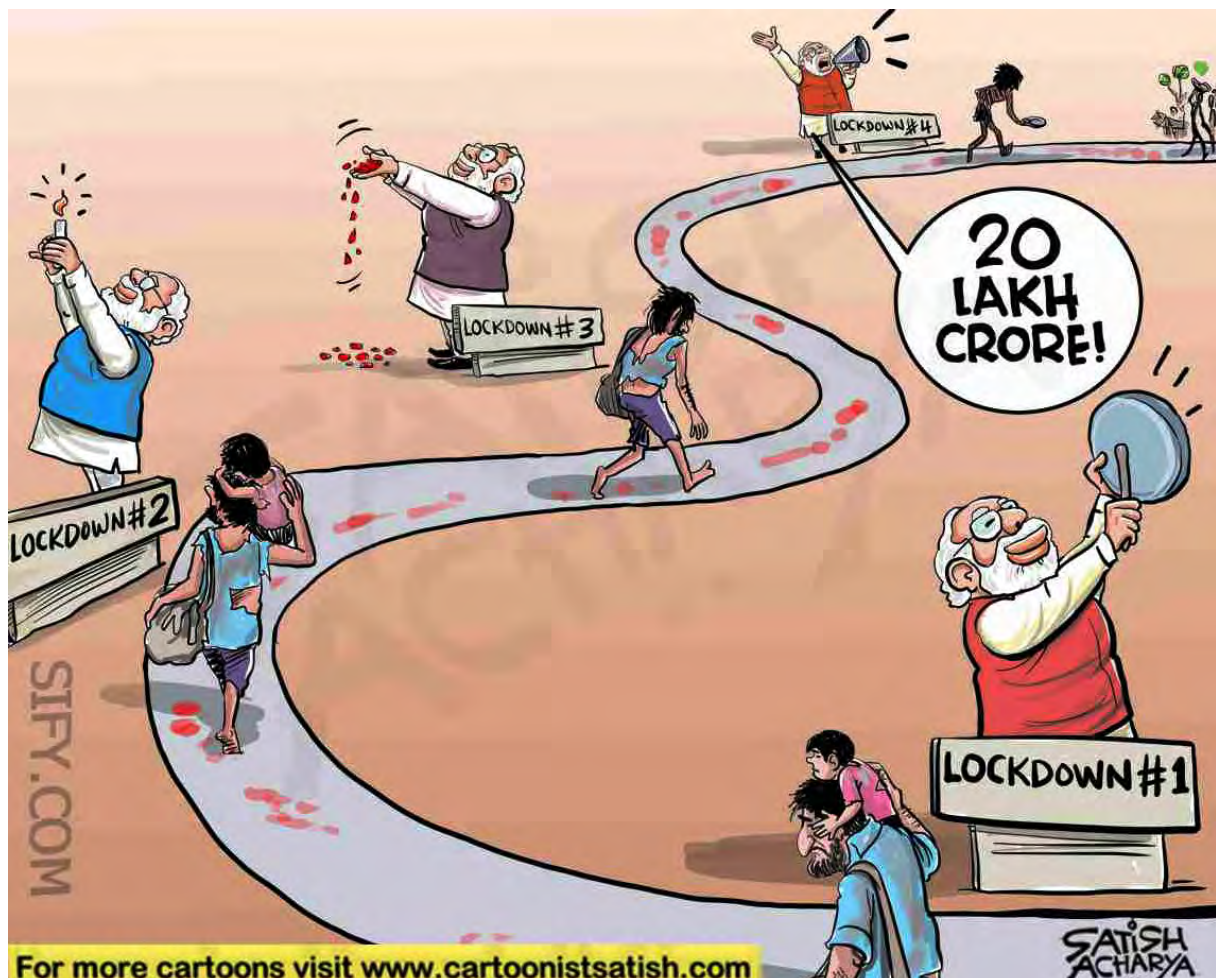
The lockdown has also shown us the depth of the Indian people's desire for democracy and justice. Many even among the relatively privileged who are able to remain indoors have refused to limit their existence to the government's 'stay at home' order or to capital's new 'work from home' code or 'home entertainment' mantra. Instead they have developed innovative forms of resistance with their new-found 'protest from home' paraphernalia and 'fight from home' spirit.

It is not enough, or rather redundant, to say that the post-

Covid19 world cannot go back to the old normal. In India, we can clearly see the contours of the 'new normal' the rulers are trying to define for the people. Democracy is being sought to be suspended and truncated as extensively and permanently as possible. Labour laws are being dismantled; land rights are being sought to be overruled; after the manufacturing and service sectors, agriculture is being sought to be brought under increased corporate control. New tools of surveillance are being enforced and the lockdown is being used as a licence to silence dissent by all means.

This 'new normal' is very much a colonial era normal for India, and accompanying this is the virulence of

the communal fascist agenda of the Sangh-BJP and the corporate might of global capital and India's own state-patronised crony capitalists. As we emerge from the shadow of the pandemic and the labyrinth of the lockdown, the challenge is clear: to stop this regressive restoration of the old and fight for the emergence of the new, and turn the victims of the lockdown into a new social power. The humiliating homecoming of the migrant worker, the reverse migration, and their bitter experience of the inherent cruelty of the existing order, must lead to a new unity between the rural and urban poor and the rise of a new level of class consciousness and militant assertion of the working people. □



Modi's Covid19 Stimulus Package: Monumentally Deceptive and Disastrous

Dipankar Bhattacharya

In his 12 May address while preaching his gospel of treating the Covid19 pandemic crisis as an opportunity and outlining his latest rhetoric of an Aatma Nirbhar Bharat, Prime Minister Narendra Modi dropped some big numbers. He announced a package worth around 20 lakh crore rupees (20K billion rupees or \$ 265 bn) or about 10% of India's GDP. Over the next five days Finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman and her deputy Anurag Thakur (better known for his vitriolic Goli Maro speeches) have given us the details of this package in five tranches. India has seldom been taken for such a huge ride.

As far as figures are concerned, this is a monumental statistical fraud. The total sum was finally allowed to rest at Rs 20,97,053 crore. This included announcements already made by the government at the end of March worth Rs 1,92,800 crore (tax concessions: 7,800 crore, Covid19 health sector package: 15,000 crore, and PM Garib Kalyan Package: 1,70,000 crore), and liquidity injected by the RBI through policy adjustments worth Rs 8,01,603 crore. So the amount actually announced over the five tranches was roughly Rs 11 lakh crore or a little over half of the amount Modi mentioned as the quantum of the package.

A bigger shock awaits you when you look at the contents of the package. Very little of the package is about actual immediate expenditure by the government. Much of it is about loans banks will disburse where the government will stand guarantor. Then there are tax

refunds worth Rs 18,000 crore owed by the government to tax payers, or payment made by the government to fund ongoing schemes, none of which can be considered as constituting any special package. In fact, the additional cash expenditure by the government for this year is estimated to be at most Rs 2.40 lakh crore (some estimates put it at as low as Rs 1.5 lakh crore).

The package pretends to touch all sections of society and all sectors of the economy. Conspicuously absent however is Modiji's 'vibrant demography' – the students and youth of India. While most other sections find a passing mention, their burning and core demands are all left utterly untouched. All this time the government was waxing eloquent about the gains of DBT (direct benefit transfer). What was needed now was a direct cash transfer to all affected families for at least a period of three months or the duration of lockdown, but the package does not have any such component. The package finally acknowledges the problem of people, especially migrant workers, not having ration cards, but does not guarantee universal delivery of ration. And the less said about the quantity – five kg grains per person and 1 kg pulses per family – the better. It mentions a scheme about developing affordable rental housing for migrant workers, but remains conspicuously silent about the acute crisis of migrant workers that erupted right with the announcement of lockdown.

Two announcements made as part of the package are

being particularly highlighted as major game-changers – the announcements regarding MSMEs and barrier-free inter-state trade of agricultural produce under a new central legislation. The MSME definition has been broadened to include both manufacturing and service sector units up to Rs 20 crore investment and 100 crore annual turnover. For this broader net, Rs 3 lakh crore have been sanctioned as collateral-free loan which can potentially benefit 45 lakh units. But the MSMEs would rather have the government and the private sector clear the Rs 5 lakh crore dues that they owed to the MSMEs, a fact admitted by Union Minister Nitin Gadkari himself. The other MSME demand was wage support for workers for the lockdown period. But rather than accommodating that reasonable demand of MSMEs, the government has now surreptitiously withdrawn the order mandating payment of wages for the lockdown period.

The proposed central legislation to enable inter-state free trade of agricultural produce has been a major demand of rich farmers and corporate agri-business. Farmers and share-croppers were rather demanding assured official procurement at a support price that ensured at least one and a half times the total input cost. The new legislation will go a long way to liberalise the entire agrarian economy, and coupled with the proposed measures facilitating corporate land acquisition, this can only mean large scale diversion of agricultural land and promotion of

corporate farming where farmers will increasingly be reduced to the status of contract farmers.

The package also includes other measures boosting privatisation and FDI, like commercial coal mining, privatisation of power and airports, increasing FDI in defence industries from 49% to 74%, promotion of private participation in the space sector and so on. Ironically, all these measures have been packaged as Aatmanirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan or 'campaign to promote self reliance'.

Apart from being guilty of massive statistical jugglery and deception, the package becomes a complete failure on two counts. Firstly, it refuses to address any of the burning issues which need to be resolved if India is to cope with the twin challenges of the Covid19 pandemic and the lockdown-induced economic disruption and crisis. Secondly, it fails to address the key question of economic contraction and recession that was already brewing before Covid19 struck us, and is destined to become more severe post-Covid19. We remember that soon after returning to power in May 2019, the Modi government had taken a massive 1.76 lakh crore from the surplus money of the RBI in August and handed over almost the entire amount to the corporate sector by way of a hefty tax cut.

Now when the economy is all set to contract – the GDP is predicted to suffer an absolute decline, possibly by more than 10% – and recession is destined to deepen, we need urgent measures to boost demand, backed by income support. Increased state expenditure is the only way out, by adopting measures to increase revenue by taxing the rich and if necessary, by printing money. The government is doing none of it. It is only taking measures to promote

private investment, including foreign investment, dismantling labour laws, weakening environmental safeguards and facilitating easier and greater corporate control over natural resources and human labour. Such measures are bound to prove all the more irrelevant and disastrous in times of a massive crisis like the present juncture.

Some commentators have described the package as Modi's 1991 moment referring to the dramatic introduction of the economic policies of liberalisation, privatisation and globalisation by the Narasimha Rao government in response to the balance of payments crisis India then faced. In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union, that was indeed a global moment of intensification of neo liberal policies marked by a worldwide retreat of the state from its economic role as a provider of welfare services and massive aggression of global capital spearheading an expansionist expedition of the so-called free and open market in country after country. Naomi Klein described this as the Shock Therapy wave of Disaster Capitalism.

Today India is in the middle of a severe humanitarian crisis marked by mass hunger and destitution and utter economic chaos and disruption triggered by the sudden imposition

of a countrywide lockdown. And this is truly a global crisis comparable to the havoc of the two world wars witnessed in the first half of the twentieth century, but in a way even more fundamental and pervasive as the economic crisis is accompanied by a global pandemic that has posed such a huge question mark before not just the framework of corporate globalisation but the basic edifice of capitalism and the way it prioritises and pursues profit over people and nature. Worldwide, people are talking of changing the priorities and bringing the needs of public health, human survival and environmental protection at the heart of the economy. To treat such a moment as an opportunity to accelerate the failed economic agenda of liberalisation and privatisation and call it the rise of self-reliant India is nothing short of a crime. This rhetoric of 'self reliance' is a preposterous euphemism for total abdication of responsibilities by the state, leaving a billion-plus people in the lurch of a cruel lockdown and mounting misery. The package is a charter of deception and disaster and pressure must therefore be mounted for a reversal of this course and for an alternative package that answers the immediate needs and also serves the longer term interests of the people. □



Enslaving India's Workers and Renting Out India To Global Capital Is Not the Way to Self Reliance

Dipankar Bhattacharya

Exactly seven weeks after he had announced the countrywide lockdown giving just four hours, Narendra Modi addressed the nation again at 8 PM on May 12. When he had announced the lockdown for 21 days, he had invoked the popular Hindi saying 'Jan hai toh jahan hai' indicating thereby that his government would do everything necessary and possible to save lives. The seven weeks that elapsed between 25 March and 12 May however only saw India lose lives in hundreds and thousands to both Covid-19 and the chaotic and cruel lockdown enforced by the Modi government.

In his 33-minute May 12 address, Narendra Modi did not even spare 33 seconds to express any sorrow for these deaths, even though his government is squarely responsible for most of the lockdown-induced

fatalities. The mounting misery of the migrant workers remained conspicuously absent in his address. In fact, he hardly spoke about the Covid-19 situation in India or the massive humanitarian crisis triggered by the coercive lockdown. This silence was deafening and the vague mention of a Rs 20,000 billion package, which he said would be spelled out later by the finance minister, could hardly assuage it.

The Prime Minister devoted his entire speech to building a new rhetoric around what he called a vision of Atmanirbhar Bharat or self-reliant India. For him the Covid-19 pandemic was not a crisis but an opportunity to be seized and he outlined how his government would like to proceed to that end. He enumerated five pillars of India – economy, infrastructure,

technology, demography and demand. Real wealth producers of India, the workers and peasants, did not figure among his pillars, except perhaps for an oblique reference to what he called India's vibrant demography.

It did not occur to him that the utter failure of his government to resolve the migrant worker problem made a complete mockery of all his pillars. It has now become a cliché to refer to India's relatively young population as a 'demographic dividend'. The bulk of the endless procession of migrant workers, the biggest peace time human exodus in living memory, would belong precisely to this advantageous demographic category. All they demanded was to be taken home by using the technological and infrastructural prowess of India, and the Modi government just failed to fulfil this basic demand in fifty days. And here was the PM lecturing us about the five pillars.

Modi advocated bold reforms in four areas – land, labour, liquidity and law. Land reform for him refers to facilitating corporate land acquisition by all and any means. His government tried to do it by amending the land acquisition law and forest rights act, but was rebuffed by all-out protests. Is he now looking at Covid-19 as the 'opportunity' to fulfil this pending agenda? By now we also know very well what his government means by labour reforms. Labour laws are already being sought to be rewritten into four Manusmriti type codes and now BJP-led state governments have begun to announce a blanket



suspension of labour laws for the next three years.

Enhanced liquidity is meant to make more loans available and we know who are pocketing all the loans. Indebted farmers are being driven to suicide, increasingly we are also hearing of suicides by women who could not repay whatever small loans they got under microfinance schemes. But the big defaulters are having their loans periodically written off, and the size of the loan write-offs since Modi came to power in 2014 amounts to Rs 6,60,000 crore or one third of Modi's promised Covid-19 stimulus package. Will enhanced liquidity mean cancellation of all farm loans and microfinance loans or more loans for India's corporates? The answer is not difficult to guess.

And we know about the direction of reform of laws. By reform on the legal front, the government does not mean scrapping the draconian colonial era laws like the Epidemic Diseases Act that is currently governing the lockdown or the

sedition law, it only means rewriting India's Citizenship Act or land and labour laws to weaken the constitutional foundation and legal framework of democracy in India.

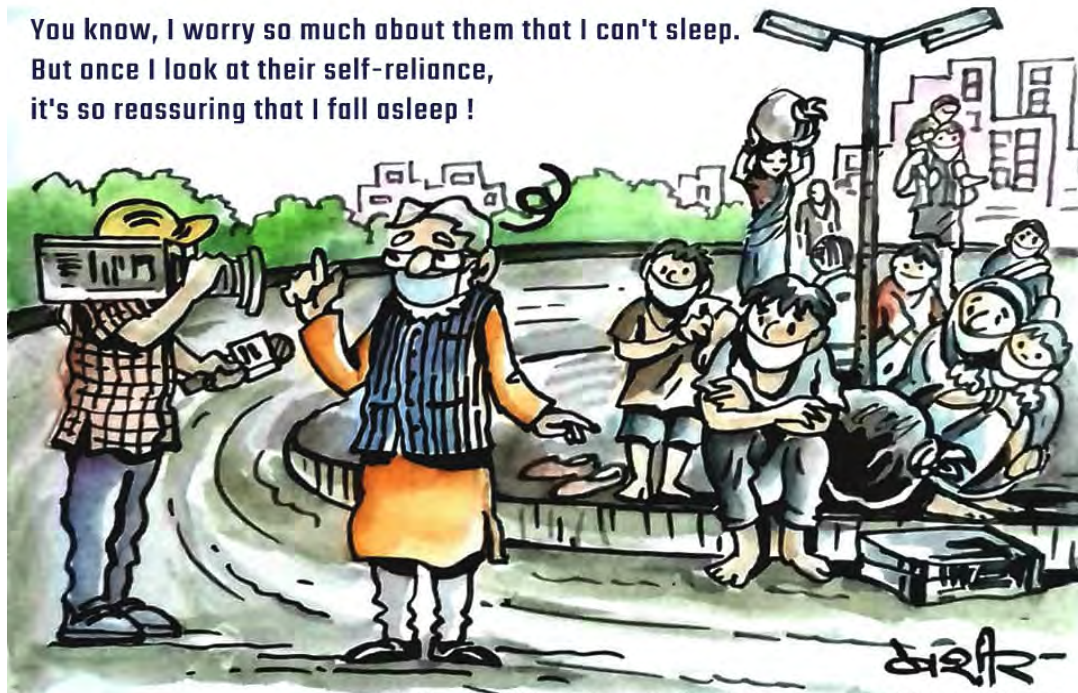
All these reforms mean systematic disempowerment and division of Indian people, and enslavement of large sections of India's working class. This is not self-reliance, this is only renting out India's natural and human resources on more attractive terms to global capital, this is devaluation of India's democracy, this is auctioning of India.

The mystery of the package will be fully unraveled in the days to come. But a few things are already clear. The sum is hugely inflated, it has been arrived at by adding up a whole series of ongoing schemes and announcements made by the RBI. The money is not going to be raised by taxing the super rich, on the contrary common people are being subjected to wage cuts and reduction in allowances and pensions. And thirdly, the package is not going

to reach the people who need it most by way of lockdown wages, subsistence allowance, free ration and compensation for various losses.

Modi also hinted at a fourth phase of lockdown, without making any critical review of the experience of the fifty days India has already been under lockdown. Lockdown was meant to slow down the spread of the virus and enable the government to step up its preparations on various fronts to face the challenges. The purpose has hardly been served on either of these two counts. Modi said the fourth phase would be different, but will it be more effective when no lessons have been learnt? Indeed, as the lockdown eases, indications are the government is willing to further jettison the common people and jeopardise their lives. The state abdicating its responsibilities and putting the onus on the people can certainly be no model of self-reliance. □

(Written on 12 May 2020)



Bashir Ahmed's brilliant take on Modi's new found mantra of 'Aatmanirbharta'!

Dealing with the Lockdown: Precious Lessons from the Unique Experience of an Unprecedented Phase

The combination of the Covid19 epidemic and the coercive and chaotic lockdown has led to an unprecedented crisis for large sections of the Indian population. The lockdown has been most unbearable for stranded migrant workers and other toiling people in both rural and urban areas who survive on the basis of their daily earnings and have little savings and food stocks to withstand the resultant loss of work and livelihood. The apathy and brutality with which the state dealt with the migrant workers - non-delivery of ration to people without ration cards, the terrible conditions of most quarantine centres and the virtual collapse of the public healthcare system - have intensified the crisis for these

vast sections of our society who have to deal with a whole set of structural injustices, inequalities and disadvantages even in normal times.

In a normal situation in a democracy, we resort to mass protests, assemblies and agitations to raise our voice against such injustice and painful blows of a crisis. But the lockdown and the protocol of physical distancing and personal hygiene mandated to deal with the epidemic have suddenly blocked all these normal avenues, whilst failing to protect the most vulnerable from the virus. The colonial era epidemic control act invoked by the government is particularly draconian.

As the Lockdown stretches on, what little money the common people had in their pockets is dwindling. The worst affected are the Tolas and Mohallas of the poor in cities and villages where empty pockets are common. Government announcements had remained more or less in the realm of propaganda. Things went from bad to worse as money ran short and grocery stores at many places were selling their goods at raised prices. CPIML organised a countrywide protest 'Against Hunger, For Food during Lockdown' with plate-Banging and fasting on 12 April to demand Food for all with Dignity. (in pic - protesting women at Bhubaneswar, Odisha)





AICTTU and AIARLA called for a 2-day hunger strike and indoor protests (inside people's own homes) to express solidarity with the crores of migrant workers stranded in different states deprived of food and basic needs while facing various kinds of repression and exclusion. The workers' organisations demanded a special **Action Plan for migrant workers.**

Arrange free transport for the safe return of migrant workers, transfer Rs 10000 as Lockdown Allowance for migrant workers, weaker sections, women and unemployed youth in their bank accounts, job security and full wage guarantee for the period of lockdown for all workers and to guarantee rations, food, drinking water, medicines, child care for stranded workers. (in pic - workers in Tamilnadu)

While normal democratic activities became impossible, the state stepped in with its new tools of surveillance and new drills of regimentation. The rumour mills and fake news factories also flooded social media and digital communication platforms overshadowing the dissemination of real information about the spread and nature of the disease.

Narendra Modi made the most of this situation with his periodic addresses and calls for public action, all in the name of honouring the doctors and other essential service workers called 'Corona warriors'. Ironically while the people were asked to clap and clang, light candles and lamps, and the armed forces were roped in to shower rose petals from the sky, many of these 'Corona warriors' were having to work without basic PPE and face hostility and stigma including eviction from their own houses. It was against this adverse backdrop that we had to

find concrete ways of facing the challenges and shape our emergency response to this completely unprecedented situation.

Looking back, we can now say that we have been pursuing eight main intersecting strategies: (i) spreading mass awareness about the epidemic; (ii) helping migrant workers in terms of food, shelter and their journeys back home; (iii) undertaking a relief campaign for the needy; (iv) countering the vicious Islamophobic propaganda and prejudice on the ground on the basis of facts, rationality and solidarity; (V) putting forward our demands and suggestions on different questions before various administrative authorities; (vi) opposing the despotic anti-people measures of the Centre and various state governments, especially the politics of witch-hunt and dismantling of labour laws; (vii) keeping up the fighting spirit and progressive discourse among the people through digital media; (viii) organizing stay-at-home protests and

social media campaigns and standing with migrant workers and quarantined people in their struggle for basic amenities and rights.

The campaign to assist migrant workers took shape from the end of March as we started receiving distress calls from stranded workers. We held coordinated efforts in cities and states with maximum concentration of migrant workers (the southern states, Maharashtra, Gujarat and Delhi NCR) and states where these workers wanted to return (primarily Bihar, Jharkhand, UP,

West Bengal, Assam and Odisha). Through our sustained efforts including judicial battles and relentless pressure on various administrative levels, it was possible to ensure supply of ration and arrangement of trains and buses (even reversal of the Karnataka government's decision to stop trains) to secure safe return of thousands of migrant workers from Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Maharashtra to Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha and West Bengal. The travails of the migrant workers do not end after getting into

Equip and Empower India to Fight Covid-19

CPIML sent a memorandum to the Prime Minister on 12 April asking him to consider on the following points in view of the crisis let loose on the common people during lockdown and for developing appropriate medical requirements.

Consultation and Cooperation Not Coercion

1. Consultation and confidence building and transparency involving all stake holders, including trade unions and representatives of all oppressed sections of society.

2. No police and administrative repression in the name of lockdown: physical distancing must be achieved through patient explanation and sympathetic help, not coercion.

3. Empty the detention centres, stop overcrowding in jails by releasing all undertrials, release vulnerable, disabled and elderly prisoners on parole, release all political prisoners including those arrested in Kashmir, and stop fresh arrests of dissenting voices and activists involved in anti-CAA protest movement and other public causes.

Migrant Workers and Other Vulnerable Sections

4. A Migrant Workers Action Plan, addressing the urgent and unresolved issues of survival and health of migrant workers – (i) drawing up lists of migrant workers and their families in coordination with village panchayats and ensuring direct cash transfer to all, (ii) giving them all support and protection in their current locations, especially ensuring food supply in sealed areas, (iii) ensuring uninterrupted payment of wages and subsistence allowance to all workers including self-employed migrant workers, (iv) fixing the

accountability of local administration and employers to ensure strict implementation of the Action Plan.

5. Action Plan for informal sector workers, sex workers, transgender persons, disabled persons, elderly persons and all other sections of people rendered precarious by the lockdown.

Hunger, Housing, and Livelihood

6. Assured Doorstep Delivery of cooked food, rations, fuel, and other essential goods and services, irrespective of ration card, registration in welfare boards, Aadhaar card or any other requirements. Community kitchens in every locality. The government must welcome and back the efforts of workers' and farmers' groups, youth organisations and various community/social organisations to build a trained and equipped volunteer force to ensure relief and delivery on war-footing.

7. Commission all unused houses, hotels, marriage halls etc to house the homeless.

8. Waivers of rent and debt, deferment of EMI payments, and payment of pandemic subsistence allowance to all affected families, regardless of presence of documents.

9. Transform MNREGA towards essential services during the pandemic, including delivery of ration and food, with due increase in Risk/Pandemic Pay.

10. Protection against wage cuts, retrenchments, job loss and security of shelter and uninterrupted supply of electricity, water, Internet etc. for the poor. Embargo on termination of employees in IT, ITES, FINTECH, service sector, tourism and MSME industries.

Agrarian Crisis

11. Urgent measures to harvest standing crops and government procurement of all crops at a fair price from farmers, to prevent the brewing agrarian crisis from escalating.

trains or buses, as they are often stopped on inter-state borders, or even after return as they are put in quarantine centres without any facilities. In several districts of Bihar and Jharkhand, notably Siwan, Katihar, Patna, Bhojpur and Giridih, our comrades have stood by the migrant workers in successfully resolving many of these problems.

The relief campaign also began at the end of March. From distribution of food packets to serving of meals through community kitchens, the campaign succeeded in enlisting the support and participation of many donors and activists and reaching out to thousands

of households on a regular basis. In several centres of Rajasthan (Udaipur and Jaipur), Uttar Pradesh (Varanasi), Bihar (Siwan, Muzaffarpur, Patna, Bhojpur) and West Bengal (Kolkata and adjoining districts), the campaign ran on a daily basis while in many other states and districts periodic campaigns were undertaken.

Protest actions like banging of plates, sit-ins, fasts, poster displays involving thousands of activists and members of various mass organisations across the country became a regular feature during these two months of lockdown. On April 12, people observed

Health Care and Medical Infrastructure

12. Urgently strengthen the public health system - by taking over and bringing all private hospitals, diagnostic labs and other medical facilities and pharmaceutical firms under strict government regulation to provide free and easily available Covid-19 testing and treatment, ensure a sufficient supply of ventilators, PPE kits, and masks.

13. Increase Covid-19 testing widely - test, trace, treat. Ensure free emergency mental health response systems for all.

14. Ensure that regular health services remain available and active during the pandemic.

15. Allocate and invest sufficient funds for urgent creation of medical and quarantine infrastructure in every state. The emphasis must be on care and education, not coercion and criminalisation when it comes to Covid-19.

16. Immediate full restoration of internet services in Kashmir, where lack of adequate connectivity is seriously hampering access to vital information and communications during the pandemic.

Essential Service Workers

17. Ensure that all essential workers and frontline fighters (health, sanitation, delivery workers, ambulance drivers, care workers, (especially for the disabled and elderly), police personnel, workers in Steel Plants, agricultural and other essential sectors), get special Pandemic Pay (amounting to minimum 3 months' salary) as well as regularisation of jobs, PPE and every manner of protection and respect.

18. Create a 24/7 domestic violence and child abuse hotline in every district in the country, with special teams to respond to distress calls from

survivors; include sanitary pads in kits of essential items to be delivered to every home; immediately withdraw the order lifting the ban on sex determination during the lockdown.

Curb Communalisation and Stigmatisation

19. Take prompt action, and also widely create awareness, against communal targeting of minorities and stigmatisation of Covid-19 cases and caregivers. There are disturbing reports of Muslims facing social boycott, exclusion and violent attacks, racist targeting of people from the North-East, and eviction and harassment of suspected Covid-19 sufferers. Prompt and exemplary action must be taken to stop these crimes and ensure full compliance with WHO directives and the belatedly issued government advisory in this regard.

Accountable and Transparent Funding for Health, Pandemic and Lockdown Relief

20. Instead of suspending funds for Local Area Development and state shares in welfare schemes, immediately stop all plans for Bullet Train, Central Vista, military procurements, government advertising, and foreign travel of the PM and members of Government; recover loans and taxes from super-rich, divert all this towards Covid-19 and lockdown relief.

21. Ensure speedy disbursement and proper utilisation of relief funds ensuring full transparency and accountability about the deposit of donations and utilisation of funds, especially the newly launched PM-CARES fund which has been declared as a dedicated fund to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic. ■



Radhika Vemula



Fatima Nafees



Prof Bharti S Kumar



AIPWA president Dr Rati Rao



Thousands of women across India turned their homes into protest sites on April 23 for responding to the call by All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA) for a one-day fast against hate and hunger.

Ambedkarite activist Radhika Vemula, as well as JNU student Najeeb Ahmad's mother Fatima Nafees, AIPWA National President Rati Rao, General Secretary Meena Tiwari, Secretary Kavita Krishnan, and AIPWA presidents and secretaries of all States led the way by observing the fast in their own homes, holding placards and posters against the hate, untouchability and violence being unleashed in the name of Covid-19, and calling for women's rights and the rights of the poor and marginalised to be safeguarded during the lockdown. They sent letter to PM to demand action on a demand charter (see next page)



AIPWA Bhojpur

a 'food for all' all-India demand day by banging their plates and raising slogans outside their houses. On April 14, at the joint call of CPI(ML), CPI(M), CPI, Forward Bloc

and RSP, Ambedkar Jayanti was observed in a big way and pledges were taken to defend Constitutional rights and defeat the spread of communal rhetoric and social stigma

Letter to PM Submitted by AIPWA units all over India

Subject: In the context of women's rights, nutrition and safety during the second phase of Lockdown

To
The Prime Minister,
Govt of India.

Sir,

Yesterday you announced an extension of the Lockdown till 3 May 2020 in order to control the Corona pandemic. While you were announcing the second phase of the Lockdown, we were hoping that you would also announce appropriate measures to resolve the problems faced by women during the past 21 days of Lockdown. Unfortunately, however, your address did not contain any such steps. The guidelines issued today speak of starting some economic activity from 20 April but even in these guidelines women have been ignored.

Sir, over the last 25 days many incidents have come to light which show the horrific life conditions women are facing. At Jehanabad in Bihar a mother watched helplessly as her child died in her arms due to want of an ambulance. A woman TB patient who had returned to Gaya District from Punjab and was admitted in the Quarantine Ward was raped and subsequently died (her test report showed negative for Corona). Also, reports keep coming in of attacks on women who are 'Corona Warriors'. It was hoped from you that you would delineate some steps to ensure that such incidents are not repeated. On behalf of AIPWA we would like to say that fighting against a pandemic and fighting against starvation and attacks on women and children are not mutually exclusive.

Therefore, we demand action from you on the following issues:

1. It is surprising that the government is taking decisions which establish discrimination against women. We are astounded to read newspaper reports that the government has relaxed the provisions in the PNPDT Act till the month of June, which in simple terms means that the ban on sex determination tests has been removed. The ludicrous logic being offered for this decision is that it will be a time-saver for women, doctors, hospitals, and private clinics that do ultra-sound tests. We demand that this decision should be revoked immediately. We demand that instructions should be given to the Health Ministry to strictly implement the provisions of the PNPDT Act. All District administrations should also be instructed to keep a special surveillance on its implementation.

2. There is no arrangement to protect women against domestic violence during the Lockdown. A 24x7 hotline should be established in every District and special teams are formed to reach women who want help. If required, the help of women's organizations can be taken for this.

3. In your address on 14 April you said that there is no shortage of food grains or medicines in the country. In that case, why are people still dying of starvation? Inasmuch as children, pregnant women, and foster mothers who used to receive nutrition from Anganwadi centers have not received it at most places even though half of April is already over. In some States (for example, Bihar) the government has spoken of putting money into the beneficiaries' accounts instead of nutrition, and Anganwadi helpers have been asked to collect account numbers, mobile numbers and Aadhar numbers for making this list. Women who live in the worst conditions are the ones who receive nutrition-food from Anganwadis. How can the government expect that all these numbers will be available with them? Secondly, food and nutrition are needs which have to be attended to immediately. Thirdly, they will get cash for food at government rates but they will have to buy the food grains at market rates which are much higher. Therefore, we demand that food and nutrition should be distributed immediately and the amount received by women should be doubled from what they used to receive earlier because now their families will not be in a position to spend anything on their care.

4. In your address, you appealed to the common people to feed the poor. Many people including social activists and organizations are already engaged in this work (although they are now being stopped at some places by the administration). But it is necessary that the government discharge its responsibility. Instead of letting food grains rot in go-downs, governmental community food centers should be opened in every poor Basti for the next three months and this should be given top priority.

5. Arrangements should be made at government ration shops for free distribution of sanitary pads for women and milk for children during the Lockdown.

6. Talk of honoring 'Corona Warriors' seems like a joke when we see that ASHA and other health workers are not being provided even with masks by the government. Your 'gamchha challenge' is fine for those who stay at home but it is of no use to people working in the field. Similarly, Anganwadi workers are being used for fighting against Corona but they have been kept out of Health Insurance. We demand that ASHA, Anganwadi workers and sanitation workers should be given an additional amount equal to 3 months' salary or Rs 10,000 as 'honor money'. ASHA and all other Scheme Workers should be given Health Insurance. Other warriors—doctors, nurses, police personnel etc should also be given 'honor money' according to their posts.

7. We demand that communal divisive forces and the rule of loot in the country should be curbed.

centred around the epidemic. On 18-19 April, protests were held primarily through organizing sit-ins and fasts to demand an Action Plan for Migrant Workers ensuring their safe return and payment of lockdown sustenance allowance. On May 5, activists of all Left parties staged joint sit-ins across Bihar demanding the safe return of migrant workers.

April 22 marked the fifty-first foundation anniversary of CPI(ML) and the 150th anniversary of Lenin's birth. The day was observed as a pledge-taking day with CPI(ML) members across the country reading out and endorsing a five-point charter of pledges declared by the Party Central Committee. May Day was also observed in a big way with workers raising

Women's organizations and women across the country showed remarkable solidarity with Safoora Zargar and held protests on 7 May to demand actions against those who are carrying out false propaganda and vulgar comments against Safoora as well as other women student leaders who were active in the anti-CAA protests.

Safoora Zargar has been active in the anti-CAA protests. She has been arrested during the Lockdown under false charges of inciting the Delhi riots. At the time of arrest she was three months' pregnant.

Women sat in their own houses and did dharna from 11 PM to 2 PM. They said that the vulgar slander and character assassination against Safoora is an attack against all of us. Therefore, we are sending our love and solidarity to Safoora amidst this Lockdown. They demanded the release of anti-CAA protesters and action against Kapil Mishra.

The many women's organizations which participated in this dharna include All India Progressive Women's Organization (AIPWA), AIDWA, NFIW, Bihar Mahila Samaj, Loktantrik Jan Pahal, Citizens' Initiative against Violence against Women, Muslim Mahila Manch, Jan Jagaran Shakti Sangathan, National Coordination of People's Struggles, Bihar Gharelu Kamgar Union, WSS, All India Mahila Sanskritik Sangathan, ASWF, Stree Mukti Sangathan, Gandhi Study Center and others.



The Left parties including CPIML, CPI, CPM, Forward Bloc and RSP organized a statewide dharna in Bihar on 5 May on the occasion of the 202th birth anniversary of Karl Marx. The dharna was held across the State including Patna, Bhojpur, Patna Rural, Siwan, Jehanabad, Arwal, Gaya, Darbhanga, Samastipur, Gopalganj and all other Districts.

While the Central and State governments are shirking from their responsibility, the entire burden was shifted to the workers already struggling with starvation and unemployment.



At CPIML Masaurhi office

and hoisting the red flag wherever possible. Earlier, on April 27, All India Agricultural and Rural Labour Association and the Kisan Mahasabha organized a protest day on the key demands of rural employment guarantee and harvesting and procurement of crops.

Women's participation in all these protests was quite significant. All India Progressive

Women's Association took the lead in protesting against communal hate and increased violence against women during the lockdown by organizing a one-day fast on April 23. Radhika Vemula and Fatima Nafis, mothers of Rohith Vemula and Najeeb Ahmad, and many academics and activists joined the fast. On May 7, women activists and students protested across the country condemning the

Opposition Parties' Memorandum to the Prime Minister for Release of Political Prisoners

May 11, 2020

The President of India
Rashtrapathi Bhawan
New Delhi

Dear Rashtrapathi ji,

We, the undersigned, are writing to you to express concern and condemnation at the spate of arrests of students and activists under the draconian UAPA during the time when the country and people are dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is a time when people all over the country, and the world, are experiencing fear and uncertainty about their well-being, and the safety of their loved ones. The central government's priority must be to single mindedly focus in effectively dealing with this pandemic while catering to the needs of the people and their requirements. "Your government's" priority must be to deal with the problems that have emerged affecting the lives and livelihoods of crores of people, as reflected in the plight of the migrant workers, many of whom have lost their lives due to hunger, exhaustion and walking many kms to reach their homes. The central government has done very little to provide relief and rations to such people.

Many countries in the world are seeking to release prisoners so as to prevent the spread of Covid-19 in prisons. In India too, the Supreme Court advised the release of prisoners on bail or parole to reduce crowding in prisons. The situation at the Arthur Road prison in Mumbai is a testimony to such dangers. Even physically disabled people with known serious medical conditions like Dr. G N. Saibaba and others are not being allowed to seek competent medical treatment.

At such a time, it is shocking to see the Government of India jailing academics, activists, women, and students, putting their health and safety at grave risk.

- In Delhi, the police directly under the Home Ministry is arresting prominent activists including women involved in the totally peaceful anti-CAA movement under the draconian UAPA on totally manufactured charges

seeking to link them with the communal violence in Delhi. In addition, scores of students are being called for interrogation by the Special Branch and intimidated. The victims in the violence perpetrated in JNU are being targeted while there has not been a single arrest of those outsiders who unleashed this violence against students and teachers. It is also shocking to note that certain communities are being targeted while the perpetrators of communally charged violence, established in various video recordings, including prominent leaders of the ruling party are moving around scot free.

- In the communal violence in north east Delhi, in spite of prima facie evidence of police connivance and the involvement of mobs attacking minority areas identified in the videos, the Delhi police is making one sided arrests of young Muslim men and interrogating only members of the minority community, creating a sense of insecurity among them.
- The arrests of Anand Teltumbde and Gautam Navlakha in the Bhima Koregaon case even while continuing the detention of activists Sudha Bharadwaj and others without any evidence is another shocking example of how civil liberties are being trampled.
- In Kashmir the continuing detention of former Chief Minister Mehbooba Mufti and many others is condemnable. So also is condemnable that prisoners from Kashmir are locked up in various jails across the country.
- The vindictive approach of the Government in continuing the detention of Shri Laloo Prasad Yadav in spite of his ill health and the stringent conditions of his imprisonment is condemnable.

We request you to urge the Government to reverse this course by releasing opposition leaders and human rights activists and ceasing the pursuit of a politics of vendetta against protesters and political dissenters at a time when the country and people have to be united in dealing with this Covid pandemic.

Sitaram Yechury, General Secretary, CPI(M)
D Raja, General Secretary, CPI
Dipankar Bhattacharya, General Secretary, CPIML
Debabrata Biswas, General Secretary, AIFB
Manoj Bhattacharya, General Secretary, RSP
Sharad Yadav, Founder, LJD
Manoj Jha, Member of Parliament, RJD
Dr. Thol. Thirumavalavan, President, VCK

Sangh-BJP brigade's defamatory campaign against jailed anti-CAA activist Safoora Zargar and demanding her immediate unconditional release. The demand for release of political prisoners and an end to the Modi regime's politics of vendetta and witch-hunting was raised jointly by five Left parties (CPIML, CPIM, CPI, AIFB and RSP) and three other opposition parties (RJD, VCK, LJD) through a joint memorandum to the President.

The suspension of labour laws by BJP-ruled state governments in UP, MP and Gujarat, the lockdown massacres and continuing deaths of migrant workers (especially the shocking incidents of the Vizag gas leak and Aurangabad Railway track tragedy), and the Modi government's fraudulent stimulus package created tremendous anger among the people. On 12-13 May AICCTU called for two days of protest, and on May 13 leaders of Left and other opposition parties issued a

Five Pledges on 22 April on the Occasion of the 51st Anniversary of the Foundation of the CPI(ML)

1. In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown declared by the Modi government to slow it down, we are facing a major health and food and livelihood crisis in the country. The poor people and the toiling masses, especially the migrant workers are the hardest hit. We pledge to live up to the clarion call of Comrade Charu Mazumdar, "The people's interest is the party's interest", and stand firmly with the affected people. Feed India, Defeat Covid.

2. While the people are paying a heavy price for the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown, the RSS and BJP are busy with their hate-filled disinformation campaign blaming China and the Muslim community for the coronavirus epidemic and misleading the people by spreading fake news, superstitious beliefs and obscurantist ideas. We strongly condemn this communal campaign, which is rapidly taking the form of social and economic boycott and blockade of the Muslim community, and reject the intensified untouchability and stigma being created around the Coronavirus. We shall do all we can to strengthen the unity and solidarity of the people, extend concern and empathy for victims of Covid-19, support frontline healthcare and sanitation workers, spread rational and progressive ideas, and defeat the communal virus.

3. The crisis has clearly shown that the state in India and the Modi government which is ruling at the Centre and most governments ruling in the states have no concern for the people. They have announced a lockdown without making any arrangement for the poor and toiling people. For the poor the state has only coercion and contempt, reserving all democracy and comfort for the rich. We shall pool all our energy and strength to expand and strengthen the CPI(ML) and intensify the people's movement to secure greater political say and power for the people.

4. The Modi government is treating the Covid-19 pandemic as a grand excuse to hide all its failures and betrayals. The state is using the lockdown as an opportunity to snatch the hard won democratic rights of the people and impose police raj. The corporate lobbies and feudal communal and criminal forces are using this

opportunity to increase their loot and domination and tighten their control. We will not allow the lockdown to become a licence for these forces and their ugly designs. By all indications, the Covid-19 pandemic is pushing India deeper into recession and the Modi government is planning to shift the entire burden onto the people. We will use all our strength to fight back and to hold the government accountable. We will struggle to ensure that India comes out of the Covid-19 crisis as a more egalitarian country, in which every citizen has the right to free, quality healthcare.

5. The Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the extreme vulnerability of global capitalism. The US state not only failed to protect its own people, it also attacked the WHO efforts, arm-twisted India, and is weaponising the pandemic by trying to prevent ventilator companies from selling to Cuba and Venezuela. The advanced capitalist countries have been the worst victims of the epidemic. Of course within these countries, it is the working people and oppressed and marginalised communities who are paying the highest price. The capitalist health system and health policy which treats health as a commodity and profitable business and not as a fundamental human right, has failed to provide any relief and care to the people. By contrast people-oriented healthcare policies and approaches have worked much better whether in Cuba or within India in the state of Kerala. We rededicate ourselves to the mission of overcoming the destructive capitalist system and march towards a more just and equal socialist world with the needs of labouring people and the environment at its centre. Today is also the 150th birth anniversary of Comrade Lenin, the great leader of the world's first socialist revolution and initiator of the first major exercise in building socialism. We pay our highest tributes to him and renew our pledge to fulfil his dream of defeating imperialism and building a socialist world.

Long live CPI(ML)!

Red Salute to all our departed leaders and great martyrs!
Inquilab Zindabad!

- CPI(ML) Central Committee

joint public call for an alternative package and withdrawal of the ordinances scuttling labour rights and factory regulations. On May 22, the joint forum of Central Trade Unions organized a countrywide protest demanding payment of lockdown wages and compensation, and withdrawal of the Modi government's moves to privatize the public sector and subvert and suspend labour laws.

Webinars and live lectures on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram have emerged as popular and quite effective tools to further progressive discourses amidst this prolonged lockdown. There have been plenty of discussions, poetry sessions and musical concerts on wide-ranging topics. There have also been a series of commemorative occasions in this period, including the birthdays of Ambedkar, Lenin and Marx, and the anniversary of the great 1857 war of Independence as well as May Day. And there have been topics galore – from various

Farmers, Agrarian Workers Protest

ALL India Kisan Mahasabha (AIKM) and All India Agricultural & Rural Labour Association (AIARLA) called for a protest day on 27 April and submitted a memorandum to the Modi government reiterating some important demands.

AIKM, AIARLA, Bihar MNREGA Mazdoor Sabha, Jharkhand Mazdoor Kisan Samiti and CPIML participated in this countrywide protest and condemned the government for neglecting the workers' lives and attacking the interests of farmers and rural poor in the name of the pandemic. These organizations appealed to the people to reject the politics of hate and divisiveness and give a befitting reply to those who are propagating rumors, lies, and hatred.

They reiterated demands for safe return of migrant workers, Rs 10,000 subsistence allowance for all poor families, Rs 500 minimum daily wage for MNREGA workers, and Rs 25000 per acre as crop loss compensation to farmers besides following demands:

1. Guarantee procurement of wheat, maize, and rabi crops of farmers and sharecroppers and Minimum Support Price at Panchayat level through FCI, Cooperative Samitis and other agencies.
2. Compensation for crop loss due to hail-storms, excess rain, fire and Lockdown at the rate of Rs 20,000 per acre for rabi crops and Rs 25,000 per acre for fruits and vegetables. Pay this compensation to all farmers and sharecroppers without delay.
3. Withdraw anti-people Electricity Reform Bill 2003 and end the present drive for privatization of electricity.
4. FEED INDIA – FIGHT COVID! Arrange sufficient rations for workers and the poor; Rs 20 lakhs compensation for families of those who died due to Coronavirus/ hunger and police repression during Lockdown.
5. Curb spreading of hatred against Muslims in the name of Corona. Strengthen social solidarity; defeat Corona pandemic!
6. Arrange Corona test labs, ICU wards, and ventilator at all Base and District hospitals. Make arrangements for free testing and treatment of Corona.

CPIML MLAs, Panchayat representatives, and Scheme workers also participated in the protest.



Jharkhand Gramin Mazdoor Sabha protest in Jharkhand



AIKM leaders protesting in Bhojpur, Bihar



AIARLA members in Bihar

Leaders of Left and other opposition parties staged a protest on 13 May against the intensified assault on labour rights by the Modi government at the Centre and various BJP-led state governments. The leaders including Comrades Dipankar Bhattacharya and Kavita Krishnan of CPI(ML), Sitaram Yechury and Tapan Sen of CPI(M), D Raja of CPI, Sharad Yadav of Loktantrik Janta Dal and Manoj Jha, Rajya Sabha MP, RJD stood outside of AKG Bhawan, New Delhi, holding placards that called for immediate withdrawal of the ordinances promulgated by the state governments of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat suspending labour laws and raising hours of work.

They said the government was using the pandemic as a pretext to systematically undermine democracy and appealed to the people to stay united and vigilant.

MOURNING THE VICTIMS OF #AurangabadTrainRunOver #VizagGasLeak #LockdownMassacres

and 200 injured.

Another horrific tragedy occurred on 8 May early morning in which 17 migrants were crushed and 2 seriously injured by a goods train when they were on the way on foot to their homes. A total of 19 migrant workers hailing from M.P.

CPIML, AICCTU, AIARLA, AISA, RYA, AIPWA and AIKMS called for a countrywide Grief and Outrage Day on 9 May 2020.

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, another disaster has struck the nation. This time a man-made one. The Styrene gas leak at 3 AM on May 7 from LG Polymer Plant in Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh had led to the death of more than 11 people (including minors)



Observing 'Shok and Dhikkar Divas at Mansa, Runjab



(L-R) Sharad Yadav, Sitaram Yechury, D Raja, Dipankar Bhattacharya, Kavita Krishnan

dimensions of the public health crisis to the deepening recession, attacks on labour laws and other constitutional rights, and of course, the ceaseless march of migrant workers on the roads – to provoke critical studies and debates among progressive circles.

All in all, the two months of lockdown have been a period rich in lessons and experience, and innovative ideas and experiments, for India's progressive camp. While the ruling fascist regime will seek to perpetuate many of the political restrictions and economic costs of the lockdown, progressive forces will surely benefit from the insights and takeaways gained over the course of dealing with this unprecedented situation. From foregrounding the issues of public health and environmental protection in the political agenda of the Left, to developing new strategies and policies to address the issues faced by migrant workers and face the challenges of intensifying corporate aggression, state repression and divisive communal designs, the revolutionary communist movement will have to build on the valuable experience of this most unique and critical phase of our social existence. □

ALL India Central Council of Trade Unions organized countrywide two-day protests on 12-13 May against the abrogation of Labour Laws in the name of fighting the Corona pandemic.

The workers and activists raised their voice against the abrogation of the Labour Laws which gives free license to capitalists to make slaves out of workers. Various social media platforms were also used to register protests.



Andhra Pradesh, 12 May



Panta, 12 May

Remembering Ambedkar amidst the Covid19 Pandemic and Lockdown

This year we are observing Ambedkar Jayanti in the shadow of a killer global epidemic and under the crushing weight of a countrywide lockdown. We cannot physically assemble to pay our tribute, but as is always the case, we must draw inspiration from his emancipatory struggles, ideas and legacy. His motto 'Educate, Agitate, Organise' must energise us in facing this enormous crisis; his fight against untouchability and his clarion call for annihilation of caste must galvanise us in the fight against the social virus of oppression and injustice accompanying the coronavirus; and the goals of justice, liberty, equality and fraternity proclaimed in the preamble to the Constitution drafted under his chairmanship must continue to guide our strivings and struggles.

The racist rightwing forces in America and Europe are blaming China, and here in India the Sangh brigade and the Godi Media are additionally blaming Muslims for the spread of the virus. The untouchability historically practised by the Manuvadi social order against Dalits is now being extended against Muslims, against the people of the North East working or studying elsewhere, against those suspected of suffering from the virus, and against even doctors and care-givers treating Covid patients. The Covid-19 pandemic has thus become a vehicle for new manifestations of untouchability and all of us who have always fought against social oppression and injustice must resist this communal virus and vicious social exclusion with all our might.



The Constitution recognizes us as citizens with fundamental rights, as builders of sovereign secular democratic India. The Modi government however treats Indians as puppets to be string-pulled with gimmicks and superstition, and poor Indians as disposable numbers who can just be condemned to a state of lockdown without food or ration, without any allowance or means of subsistence. Millions of migrant workers have been forced to walk hundreds of kilometres to get back home while millions remain stranded without any food or money. Conditions are equally bad for the rural and urban poor who have no ration or relief reaching them despite government claims to the contrary. Ambedkar would exhort us to assert as citizens, insist on our rights and due share, and fight superstition and prejudice with scientific temper and human rationality.

All through his life Ambedkar fought for rights and liberties, rights of workers, equality of women, and liberties of citizens. Today the Modi government is riding roughshod over all our hard won rights. The very act invoked by the government to announce the lockdown is a 123-year-old colonial legislation, the draconian Epidemic Diseases Act of 1897 which authorizes the state to announce any arbitrary

measure while robbing citizens of all legal safeguards and protection. The eight hour working day is being sought to be stretched once again back to twelve-hour shifts. The law banning sex determination tests of embryos, which facilitate female foeticide, has been suspended on the pretext of the medical pressures of the pandemic. Employers are demanding wage cuts and massive retrenchments and the Chief Justice of India asks why workers need to be paid wages when they are being supplied food in lockdown.

Human rights, especially the rights of the oppressed sections and the freedom of expression of dissenting citizens and critical voices, have never really been secure in India. They have become especially insecure today as the Modi government seeks to silence every critical voice. In the middle of a pandemic when the government should be releasing all political prisoners and granting bail and parole to all undertrials and elderly and disabled prisoners, the state in India is seeking to arrest and persecute more activists. From academics and writers like Anand Teltumbde and Gautam Navlakha to journalist Siddharth Varadarajan and anti-CAA protesters, all are being persecuted even as teachers and human rights campaigners like GN Saibaba, Varvara Rao, Sudha Bharadwaj and several leaders of agricultural labourers and defenders of dalits and adivasis across India continue to languish in jails. As we remember the emancipatory legacy of Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar we must demand the fullest protection for human rights and constitutional liberties of all citizens. □

May Day 2020

International Day of Workers in Times of Global Pandemic

MAY DAY is the International Day of Workers. The inspiration came from the first big battle to regulate hours of work, to limit the working day to eight hours. May Day is still about the working day, especially in India where the government is stretching it back to twelve hours in the middle of the Coronavirus lockdown. May Day is about paid holidays for all workers. And let us remember there are still millions of workers in India who are not even recognised as workers.

May Day 2020 is of course about those essential workers for whom there is no respite even in the middle of, or rather precisely because of, this pandemic-induced lockdown. The doctors and nurses to paramedical staff and community health workers, sanitation workers, transport workers and policemen and women, for all of whom these are times fraught with excessive workload and risk, and they are having to face this danger often without basic protective gears. Clapping for them will only mean adding insult to injury if their basic and immediate problems are not addressed and resolved.

May Day is about dignity of labour and safety of workplaces. Workers getting into sewers and routinely getting killed in the process are denied both. Large sections of workers in India continue to face daily humiliation and harassment, including sexual harassment and caste oppression, in their workplaces. May Day is about our continuing battle for recognition of our work, for safe workplaces, for a democratic and dignified environment for our work.

And this May Day as work from



home is becoming the new buzz and new reality for many across the world, let us first of all remember those brothers and sisters who have access to neither. There are millions of migrant workers who are stranded away from home, who have no work or income, and have only insecurity and insult, hunger and misery as their constant companions. There are all those construction workers who have constructed the homes where people are advised to stay safe and isolated but who have no homes they can call their own.

Let us also think about the women and children who have always worked at and from home, but have always remained invisible and their contributions have never been recognised. Let us also think about the blurring of boundaries between home and workplace for the big contingent of the workforce in the IT sector, for whom this seamless transition means a massive spillover of stress. May Day is about this entire spectrum of workers, from those who have always been confined to the four walls of home to all who are now being burdened with all the

'benefits' of working from home.

May Day 2020 is about the impending recession that is staring us in the face. How will the economy recover from this devastating shock and disruption? And who will bear the cost of this huge loss? Already, millions have lost their jobs and livelihood. Wages are being cut, dearness allowances are being frozen, most industries are talking of massive retrenchments even as prices of essential commodities have begun to soar. The burden of the pandemic and this impending recession cannot be transferred to the already impoverished and weakened working people. May Day 2020 is about demanding an immediate enforcement of Covid wealth tax to raise necessary funds for rebuilding the economy and providing relief to the people.

It is the workers who lie at the centre of production. The resources provided by nature are transformed through human labour into goods and services for our ever expanding consumption needs. It is this produce which has got accumulated as mountains of wealth in the hands of a tiny minority, and is being used as a weapon to wage a war on the working people. May Day 2020 is about rethinking the whole system of production, acquisition and distribution of wealth. We have had enough of austerity for the masses and prosperity for the few, privatisation of profit and nationalisation of loss, private accumulation and corporate control over socialised production. Covid 2019 is a wake up call to protect nature and defend the people from the clutches of corporate greed and

plunder and create a new, more just world.

Ambedkar had famously said that caste is not about division of labour, it is division of labourers. May Day is about the unity of labourers. It is about worldwide unity of workers and oppressed peoples. Worldwide, it is the working people who have borne the biggest brunt of the Covid

2019 pandemic thanks to the systematic commercialisation and destruction of the public health system in most countries and the utterly callous and cruel response of most governments towards tackling the pandemic. Yet, governments are busy abdicating their responsibilities and blaming and dividing the workers in the wake of the pandemic. Challenging

this divisive agenda has never been more urgent than today.

Today when the mismatch between global capitalism and human survival has become so explosively glaring, another world, a new and better world, has become absolutely essential and urgent. We truly have a whole new world to win and build. The people united will never be defeated. □

The 202nd Birth Anniversary of Karl Marx

Foil the Design to Use the Covid-19 Crisis as a Tool of Coercion and Control, Use it as a Catalyst for Collective Resistance and Social Transformation

Dipankar Bhattacharya

Marx was a revolutionary realist to the core. For him the real was primarily material and motion was the mode of existence of matter. He was always rooted in the objective social reality, but acknowledging reality was never justifying the status quo, but making every effort to transform the social reality and secure emancipation from all bondage. But how does one remember Marx on his 202nd birth anniversary when things seem to have come to a standstill, when the entire world seems to be in a lockdown mode, when distancing has become the norm and the digital is becoming the standard mode of expression?

Taking a cue from Marx, we need to focus on the real conditions of life, on the real situation unfolding before us. This reality is not one-sided but multidimensional, not straightforward but complex. We need to focus on the underlying motion beneath this veneer of stillness or stagnation and look at

this motion not as a linear movement but as the net result of contradictory pulls and pressures.

Let us leave aside the medical dimensions of the current global pandemic for virologists and epidemiologists and focus on the social reality instead. Since the pandemic is global, let us begin by looking at the global capitalist reality in the wake of this pandemic. The first thing that stares us in the face is how intimately the pandemic reflects the trajectory of globalization. Here is a virus that originated from China, the biggest powerhouse of the global economy and spread across the world.

The top twenty worst affected countries more or less conform to the composition of the G20. And the intensity of the disaster is more or less directly proportional to the degree of global connectivity and concentration of capital. Of course let us be very clear that the eventual impact will only aggravate existing inequalities, both within the affected

countries and internationally.

The crisis has laid bare the fundamental contradiction between human need and corporate greed. The public health system has been systematically subordinated almost in every capitalist country to the profit calculations of private healthcare, to the vested interests of the nexus comprising big private hospitals, pharmaceutical companies and insurance giants. The degradation of nature and climate change caused by the corporate development model has also reached alarming unsustainable levels.

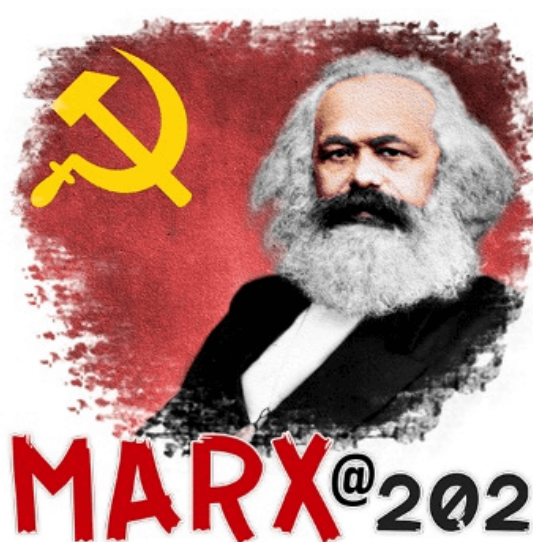
While the World Health Organisation issued an international public health emergency alert in the end of January itself, when there had been no deaths yet outside of China, most countries with the exception of a few in East Asia and Europe, did not pay any heed and woke up much later only to belatedly implement the Chinese model of lockdown with much less

efficiency and efficacy. In the process the economy has suffered a massive and protracted disruption, the like of which we have perhaps never seen before, at least not on this scale and for this long.

Every capitalist economy revolves around production and sale of an ever expanding range of commodities, and the lockdown has majorly affected it. The work in segments of service sector, like in IT and education, has been relocated as work from home, but manufacturing and transport and aviation industries have virtually come to a standstill. Retrenchments and pay cuts are already being announced across the board and the resumption of the economy will certainly be no less challenging and we will perhaps be experiencing nothing short of an upheaval.

The modern capitalist state has grown into a complex multilayered behemoth where the coercive core usually lies hidden behind various institutions of statecraft and state-citizen interface. But the pandemic and its administrative adjunct, the lockdown, have put the spotlight back on the basics, the state as a repressive and surveillance apparatus with little to show on the fronts of administration, delivery and governance.

A crisis of this proportion, with insecurity and uncertainty writ large on every front and chaos reigning supreme, has understandably given a big fillip to religious beliefs and even lots of superstition and bigotry. It may be shocking for the modern mind looking for reason and rational inquiry, but it is pertinent to remember what Marx told us about religion: "Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the



expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions." In the middle of so much cruelty and chaos, it should not surprise us to see people clinging to religion to secure some solace in a heartless world.

While Marx helps us make sense of the unfolding global crisis, we of course need to pay special attention to what we are experiencing in India. The Modi government and the Sangh-BJP brigade have been aggressively pursuing a communal fascist agenda and they are trying to make full use of the crisis as an opportunity to accelerate their fascist project and tighten their grip. They have been busy redefining the terms of citizenship and reducing citizens to subjects. They have discovered new opportunities to link the health crisis with their scheme of nationalism and regiment the society accordingly.

They grabbed every opportunity to fit the coronavirus into their communal scheme and with the help of a complicit media they managed to put the entire blame at the doorsteps of China and Tablighi

Jamaat. When physical distancing was advocated as a key precaution, they lapped it up and used it to reinforce untouchability and social exclusion and spearhead systematic social and economic boycott of Muslims and now we can see around us a whole new level of communal virus, heightened Islamophobia and vicious social stigma around Covid 19.

The lockdown is of course every dictator's dream and the Modi government is relishing it to the hilt. It has emerged as

a staunch champion of lockdown, using it as a weapon to centralise powers and resources (PM-Cares is a brazen case in point), intensify surveillance (by making the invasive Aarogya Setu App increasingly mandatory), suspend and dismantle democracy (we can see the police and bureaucracy dictating terms, opposition parties, mass organisations, civil society organisations, experts, opposition-led state governments all being marginalised and dissenting academics, intellectuals and activists being subjected to a virulent witch-hunt) and further promote the Modi cult (projecting Modi as the saviour and placing him above all accountability).


But history tells us that dictators and emperors do not rule for ever and it is the people who always have the last word. While the Modi regime wants to utilise the Covid19 pandemic and the current lockdown to their advantage, the failure of the government, the cruel and unjust nature of its rule, and the coercive class character of the state and the system have never been as glaring as they are today. India has been shaken by the explosive

nature of the social crisis triggered by the lockdown. The migrant worker and the hungry poor have become the representative social faces of the present crisis. While the government is talking about having accepted economic sacrifice to save the people, the fact is that the people have been left in the lurch, to suffer and die, because of lack of food and jobs and money, if not the coronavirus.

Marx used to study and analyse reality to understand and fight it better, never to justify it, and always for the purpose of changing it. He

always looked for ways to spread revolutionary ideas and initiatives and strengthen collective action. Today as global capitalism faces an unprecedented crisis and the Modi government stands exposed for its utter failure and betrayal, we must adopt this revolutionary Marxist approach of dealing with the crisis and the emerging reality.

Covid19 is a huge moment of rupture and disruption. Global capitalism cannot continue in its old ways and in India too, the old policies have been exposed like never before. Now is the moment

to press for a change of course, to insist on making the systems of public health, public distribution and public transport truly public and universal. Even in the middle of lockdown we have converted 'stay at home' into 'work from home and protest from home', and we have combined physical distancing with social empathy and solidarity. We will not allow the Modi government to use the crisis to rob us of our resources and rights, we will fight back to foil its fascist design and secure our dignity and justice. 

Experiences of Relief Work in Bihar: Government Abdicates, People take Initiative

Santosh Sahar

As a spate of migrant workers walking back home in extreme distress, more deaths caused by anti-worker, anti-poor policies of Central and State governments than by Corona, the extent of hunger and starvation rapidly increasing, starvation deaths from Bhojpur to Western Champaran despite government denials—it seems as if the government has deliberately left the poor, the workers and the common people to suffer and die.

Whatever meager relief announcements were made by the government were entangled in various kinds of complications and officials were seen to be merely fulfilling a formality for name's sake. In this crisis, the common people of Bihar took up the challenge of disbursing rations to migrant workers, rural poor and other needy people, thus epitomizing humanitarian compassion despite governmental cruelty and non-cooperation. Through their

initiatives they disproved the false propaganda of the BJP-Sangh against the minority community in the name of Corona. We saw numerous examples of this, from blood donation for the needy by Insaf Manch activists in Muzaffarpur to relief work done by Shaheen Bagh activists in Gadhani.

Nevertheless, incidents of cruelty and attacks by feudal criminals were also seen during this period. Protesting against this, CPIML disbursed relief to the poor and weak sections and also among upper castes, and established a positive contact with them. The relief work included running community kitchens, distribution of dry rations, cleanliness drives, arrangements for basic essential goods, etc.

The CPIML initiatives started early, in the month of March itself. Immediately after the Lockdown migrant workers from Delhi, Punjab, Haryana, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh were stopped from entering

Bihar at the Mehraun border in Devariya District. Consistent efforts by CPIML Darauli MLA Satyadev Ram succeeded in arrangements being made for those workers to return home. Relief camps were run for migrant workers. Water, Chiwda, oranges, bananas and other food were disbursed among workers. CPIML ran a Corona relief camp at the Lalit Bus Stand in Siwan, led by senior Party leader Amarnath Yadav. Rations were disbursed to 896 families in 9 Panchayats in Raghunathpur including Karsar, Rajpur, Nihri Kalan, Panjwar, Tari and Dighwalia. Relief work was done among about 200 families in Siwan city. The Party initiatives received extensive cooperation from different sections of society.

In Bhojpur District a Prevent Corona Jansankalp Campaign was planned in March itself. Large banners were put up in all the Blocks and an awareness campaign along with soap distribution was decided.

During the campaign we saw large scale hunger, especially in Musahar Toli, and efforts were made to put pressure on the administration for food grains and rations distribution. Lists were prepared in all the Blocks of people who were out of the BPL lists. Immediately after the Lockdown began, Rahul Manjhi had died of starvation in Ara city. CPIML activists pressurized the administration into action, and started ration distribution in poor Tolas. 35 families in Jawahar Tola and Musahar Toli of Ara city each received 8 kg rice and 2 kg atta. AISA activists distributed rations to 150 families in Chandwa Musahar Toli, each family receiving 5kg rice, atta, potatoes and soap.

Of the 60 landless Ravidas families in Khanani Khurd village, 20 had not received government rations. 5 of the 20 Paswan families did not possess ration cards. 2 of the 100 Sao (Kanu) families and 32 of the 150 Yadav families did not have ration cards; 3 of the 8 Brahmin families did not have ration cards. A dharna was organized against this and the administration was made to distribute 2 months' rations to 34 card-holders and other non-card holding families.

At Panwari village in Tarari Block 700 families were each provided 3 kg rice and 1 kg potatoes through the efforts of Party comrades and local supporters. A list of 1494 families from 12 Panchayats was prepared and sent to the Zonal Officer with demands for ration and relief materials. 62 families in Karisath Musahar Toli were provided 10 kg wheat, 5 kg rice and 1 kg dal. 82 families in Masadh village were provided 5 kg rice, 5 kg wheat, 1 kg dal and 1 cake of soap through the village Mukhiya and the PAKS Head. Pressure was put on the Sandesh Block administration to provide relief to 57 families. Similarly, pressure was put on Koilvar City Panchayat Head to 5 kg atta each to 90 families and the Party Committee provided 10 kg atta each to 33 families. Soap is being disbursed in dalit Mohallas in every Block. Lists are being prepared of names which are not included in BPL lists and efforts are being made for rations for them. A community kitchen in the name of Comrade Ramnaresh Ram was started at Ahir in Ara to provide food for the needy. The local Party Committee is running this kitchen with help from supporters.

Initiatives from the Party and

Shaheen Bagh activists have distributed rations to 1007 families in Gadhani Block, including dalit, mahadalit and minority Mohallas and Tolas. This cooperation enhanced and strengthened our rapport with the minority community and anti-NPR-NRC-CAA activists. As a result, they participated in large numbers in the 'Thali Bajao Ration Do' campaign called by the Party. Shaheen Bagh activists collected Rs 90,000 in contributions and this was used for relief materials like dry rations and soap for distribution in needy Mohallas and Tolas. CPIML Panchayat representatives also led and participated vigorously in relief work. Relief work was done in Rajput dominated areas also. Upper caste poor in Kurmuri village, once known for their feudal dominance, praised CPIML relief work and also benefited from it. The names of medium farmer families who were in distress but could not say so openly (whose situation became known to us during the course of our surveys) were also added in the list of needy families for ration distribution. A Party activist who is a teacher gave half his salary as contribution. Shopkeepers in Gadhani Bazaar contributed rations. Farmers who were able to



Darauli MLA Satyadev Ram succeeded in arrangements being made for Bihar workers returning home at Siwan-UP border

contributed rice and wheat.

The poor in Deodhi village in Agiaon constituency (which is also the paternal home of the present JDU MLA) were not getting rations from the dealer. The dealer is the MLA's brother and his wife is a member of the District Council. During our relief work here we found that the villagers were clearly angry against the MLA.

Relief work was started in Muzaffarpur District also soon after the Lockdown was announced. 2000 masks were distributed among the rural poor, railway workers and police personnel. From 6 April to 25 April dry rations (food grains, potatoes, salt, soap etc.) were distributed regularly among rural poor and footpath dwellers. 2500 poor families were covered in this ration distribution. Rations were also distributed to 500 families of Party activists who come from the working class. Pressure was also put on the administration for ration distribution and better arrangements in quarantine centers.

In addition to ration distribution by Insaf Manch and CPIML activists, 4 units of blood were donated for the operation of 10 year old Muskan



Ration Distribution in Kankarbagh, Patna by CPIML-AICCTU

from a very poor family. Aftab Alam, Khalid Rahmani, Matlubur Rahman and Majid Siddiqui were the blood donors. Similarly, blood was donated for other patients including a plastic anemia patient by Akbar Azam Siddiqui and Yasser.

Daily food distribution and dry ration distribution was done for 30 days among 500 families at Kankarbagh in Patna City. Despite consistent non-cooperation from the administration, the Party distributed rations to 381 families in Digha, 213 families in Gulzarbagh and 700 tempo drivers. Lists of needy persons, including 84 women in

Ashiana, Patna were prepared and submitted to the concerned officials.

Soniyawa Panchayat Mukhiya (CPIML) in Dulhin Bazaar, Patna Rural has prepared a well-arranged isolation center for migrants from outside to prevent the spread of Corona.

Consistent relief work and ration distribution was also carried out in Gaya and Darbhanga. At Chandanpatti in Darbhanga, the Party took initiatives to counter stigmatization and boycott of Muslim vegetable vendors. Similar initiatives for relief work were also carried out in other Districts.



Ration distribution in Muzaffarpur by CPIML and Insaf Manch members

MLAs' Struggle for Return Home of Migrant Workers

The migrant workers' suffering-filled odyssey on foot still continues. Around 600 people have died so far due to the cruel policies and behavior of governments during Lockdown. Many of these are workers from Bihar. More deaths have occurred due to road accidents, hunger and other reasons than due to Covid19. At the beginning of the Lockdown the Nitish Kumar government had openly declared that migrant workers would not be allowed to enter Bihar. For a long time the administration was busy trying to find ways to obstruct entry of workers into the State, but under pressure from agitations the government was finally forced to allow migrant workers to enter Bihar.

While the Bihar government and leaders and MLAs of ruling parties like BJP and JDU showed appalling cruelty towards migrant workers, left them to fend for themselves and even die and made them 'untouchable' by practicing social distancing, CPIML MLAs on the other hand from day one put their own lives on the line in their unceasing efforts to facilitate the return home of migrant workers. In the second phase of the Lockdown they kept a close watch on the conditions at quarantine centers and made arrangements for rations for migrant workers, rural poor and other needy persons at their personal level as well as by putting pressure on the administration.

Migrant Workers Stopped from Entering Bihar

The three current CPIML MLAs Mahboob Alam, Sudama Prasad and Satyadev Ram were in consistent talks with the government

and local administrations and were in correspondence with the Bihar government and other State governments for necessary steps to be taken for the safe return home of migrant workers. They demanded relentlessly from the Bihar government that in this hour of crisis the government should abandon autocracy and accept cooperation and coordination from the Opposition. It was this pressure that forced Nitish Kumar to hold a meeting with all opposition parties. Former MLAs Amarnath Yadav, Arun Singh, Chandradeep Singh and other party leaders were also constantly active in relief work during the Lockdown.

Migrant workers were finally allowed to enter Bihar due to initiatives by CPIML MLAs. On the third day of the Lockdown about 150 migrant workers walking home arrived at the UP-Bihar Mehrauna (Siwan) border at about 8 PM on 27 March. As Nitish Kumar has made a horrifically anti-worker declaration that no migrant worker would be allowed to enter Bihar, the Siwan administration refused to allow these workers to enter into the State boundary. Attempts were being made to forcibly send all the workers back in a truck. CPIML MLA Satyadev Ram came to know about this. He immediately reached the border and contacted the local administration who also arrived there soon. The BDO cited the government order; Satyadev Ram vociferously opposed this and said that we shall not comply with these blatantly anti-worker and anti-humanitarian policies of the government. The situation was becoming increasingly tense and the administration spoke to their superior authorities. Satyadev Ram sat on a dharna on the spot. The administration had to bow down before his firm attitude. Led

by Satyadev Ram, the migrant workers walked about 1 ½ km from the border to RBT College where arrangements for their accommodation were made. At the initiative of the MLA, 2 quintal chooda (beaten rice) and jaggery were immediately disbursed to all the workers. Just then news came of 500 more workers not being allowed to enter the border. Initiatives were again taken to allow these migrant workers inside and for arrangements to accommodate them. By the time they were registered and sent to the same college, it was 3 AM. In the morning Satyadev Ram personally made arrangements for chooda and jaggery for all the workers. This center was run solely on the Party's initiative. Satyadev Ram spoke to the media and demanded that the government should make arrangements for sending all the workers safely back to their Home Districts. Seeing the tardiness of the government, the MLA personally arranged 2 buses. This had an effect on the administration and they also arranged buses. 4 quarantine centers were made at Jeeradei, Mairwa and 2 other places and the migrant workers were taken to these centers where arrangements for their food and stay were made. At the initiative of the MLA, arrangements for chooda-jaggery at the Mehrauna border were also made. Grapes, oranges, bananas and other food items were also provided. This center also ran on the Party's initiative till 9 April. About 22,000 workers were sent to their Home Districts through the efforts of the MLA.

CPIML Relief Camps

Relief camps were organized at the initiative of former MLA Amarnath Yadav. A Corona relief camp was organized at the Lalit Bus Stand

in Siwan. Rations were distributed to 896 families at 9 Panchayats in Raghunathpur including Karsar, Rajpur, Nikhli Kalan, Panjwar, Tari and Dighwalia. Relief work was done for about 200 families in Siwan city. CPIML initiatives received widespread support and cooperation from various sections of society. Melons and essential rations were distributed to about 2500 migrant workers in Raghunathpur constituency.

Consistent initiatives were also taken by Tarari (Bhojpur) MLA Sudama Prasad. After the Lockdown he constantly received calls from migrant workers stranded in various parts of the country. He sent letters to Principal Secretary of the Bihar Disaster Management Department, Bihar Bhavan in Delhi, Bhojpur DM, and Bihar Assembly Secretary for rations and safe return home of about 60,000 migrant workers stranded at about 150 different places in the country, resulting in suitable interventions in some cases. Similarly, Mahboob Alam was also constantly active for the safe return home of workers from Seemanchal.

Horrific Quarantine Centers

CPIML MLAs raised their voice against the horrific conditions prevailing in quarantine centers.

The government has turned these quarantine centers into torture chambers, and the inmates are being stigmatized as if they are responsible for the spread of Corona across the country. The elitist mentality of 'social distancing' is being epitomized here, whereas 'physical distancing' is completely missing. People are crammed like sheep into small spaces. If even one person gets infected with Corona, it will be impossible to save anyone. The condition in these centers is worse than that in jails.

Reports are coming consistently from the quarantine centers of half-cooked or spoilt food. People with diabetes and other serious diseases are being given nothing but rice to eat. There are no beds for sleeping. People are unable to sleep for lack of mosquito nets or coils. There are no toilets for women. There is no milk for children. The CPIML MLAs visited these quarantine centers to find out the facts of these inhuman conditions and put pressure on the administration to make proper arrangements for migrant workers and to behave with human sensitivity towards them. These initiatives succeeded to a certain extent in breaking society's negative attitude towards migrant workers. Many people have started coming forward to help them.

Tarari MLA Sudama Prasad has so far inspected 23 quarantine

centers. The conditions in all of them are hellish. Satyadev Ram has visited 20 centers in Siwan including those at Krishnapali, Chakri, Balahu and Son. Mahboob Alam has also visited several centers. Efforts on the part of the MLAs have resulted in mosquito nets, milk for children, etc. being provided at many centers. Administrative personnel have started behaving decently with the workers, clothes and vessels were arranged, fans and lights repaired, and cleanliness improved at many centers.

Discriminatory Treatment to Migrants

The CPIML has demanded from the government that the registration process of returning home should be simplified and the number of trains and buses should be increased. They have pointed out the difference in treatment given to elite persons from outside and poor migrant workers. Why this discriminatory treatment?

People returning on Rajdhani trains and elite persons are not being asked to undergo tests; they are allowed to go straight home instead of being quarantined. But migrant workers are sent to quarantine centers which are no less than torture chambers. At many centers the workers are forced to spend the nights in fields due to



(L) RYA leader Manoj Manzil leading a protest against sorry plight at quarantine centers in Bhojpur.

(R) MLA Mahboob Alam in Katihar visited many such centers and forced the Bihar Gov to supply essentials commodities.

paucity of space. Dominant sections in villages do not allow them to enter the villages. If prevention of infection is to be ensured, these workers should be given a rapid test and then sent home, where they can remain in home quarantine. Only the persons with symptoms need to be kept separately. The government should adopt a scientific and foresighted policy in this matter.

Give Jobs to Returned Migrants, Implement Labour Laws

The MLAs have also demanded from the government that adequate employment should be generated for workers within the State according to their qualifications. They should also be given grants and interest-free loans to start their work. Many of them are skilled labor and can play an important role in the development of their home State Bihar. The government has also said similar things, but it is a matter of grave concern that working hours have been extended from 8 to 12 hours. This is not only injustice but an attack on the rights won by workers after long struggles. Abrogation of labor laws means that all rights of the workers are snatched away and they will become slaves of their employers. Therefore, our demands are: working hours should not be extended at any cost; give jobs to workers instead of using JCB machines for the Jal-Jeevan-Hariyali scheme; the government has recommended 200 days' work in MNREGA which is welcome, but at the same time Rs 500 minimum daily wage should be guaranteed; Rs 10,000 Lockdown Allowance and 6 months' rations for all workers; complete loan waiver and crop loss compensation due to Lockdown, excess rains or hail storms for all farmers at the rate of

'Corona Maha Loot' Scam

In the quarantine centers the migrant workers are being treated more cruelly and inhumanly than the British Raj used to. The funds meant for migrants are being embezzled in what is now known as 'Corona Maha Loot'. Big announcements are being made through newspapers of food, milk, biscuits, fruit etc. being disbursed in quarantine centers and good arrangements for sanitation, light and toilets. But reality is the horrifying opposite. CPIML leaders who visited these centers said that after MP Chandeshwar Chandravanshi's video-conferencing with Collectors, the loot has increased manifold. In view of the increasing protests, heavy police bandobast is being done at the centers. But the real aim is to carry on the loot without exposure and to hush up injustice in the name of safety.

Villagers and Relatives Protest

On 8 May, responding to a call by CPIML, hundreds of farmers and workers including relatives of those interred in the quarantine centers held a dharna, keeping Lockdown rules, to demand proper food and other arrangements at quarantine centers, display boards of governmental facilities available at the centers, suspension of Nauru Quarantine Center in-charge Jehanabad CO, sending quarantine center inmates to home quarantine after proper blood tests. The dharna was held at various places in Jehanabad including the CPIML District office as well as several villages. CPIML leaders said that if quarantine center conditions are not improved, the relatives of those held at these centers would be constrained to hold protests outside the centers. They demanded that if everything is being run properly, why is the Nitish government not putting out the list of quarantine center facilities in the public domain?

On 6 May 2020 a CPIML fact-finding team led by Manoj Manzil visited the quarantine center at Buniyadi Middle School, Agiaon, Bhojpur. They found the conditions to be appalling, lacking in quality as well as quantity of food, sanitation, water, light, fans, mosquito nets, toilets, spraying of bleaching powder and women's safety arrangements.



Protest from homes to demand essential facilities in quarantine centers, 8 May

Rs 25,000 per hectare; Rs 20 lakhs each to the families of all workers killed during the Lockdown.

Migrant Workers Volunteer for Quarantine but Government Takes No Heed

A CPIML fact-finding team visited the Quarantine Center Chaiyachak Utkaramit Middle School in Shivpur village in Bhojpur district. There were 35 workers at the school but nobody to take care of them or their needs. These workers were checked up at the Hospital and told to go to the Gadhani High School, but when they went there they found nobody. They then came to their own village and voluntarily climbed over the wall of the school and stayed inside. The Government of India has declared this to be a Red Zone. All these migrant workers have come back from Gujarat.

When no one from the administration turned up, the villagers informed the CPIML, after which the team arrived at the Middle School. The Bhojpur DDC was informed and the BDO was also called. It was only after that the workers got a kit each (soap, sanitizer, mask, lungi, banyan, towel, plate, bowl, glass, comb, bucket and mug).

The BDO came to the spot and assured CPIML activists that arrangements for food would be made from the next day. He requested to manage their food for one day. Accordingly, the party arranged food for them through the efforts of the villagers. □

CPIML Team Visits Jyoti

A team of CPIML led by Com. Laxmi Paswan went to Sirhulli village of Singhwara block of Darbhanga district on 27 May to visit Jyoti who recently cycled her injured father Mohan Paswan all the way from Gurgaon. They gifted a few books to Jyoti.

The regimes in Delhi & Patna are now busy praising Jyoti for her brave act. Ivanka Trump tweeted to laud Jyoti for her 'feat of endurance'. But the conditions of Jyoti's family in Darbhanga and Gurgaon where her father used to pull a rickshaw tell a story of utter deprivation. The family of eight has to live in a single room house without any hand-pump or toilet. After Mohan Paswan got injured early this year, his landlord tried to evict him from his Gurgaon room. It was sheer desperation that drove Jyoti to try and bring her father home on cycle. The story of this brave girl and her family exposes the hollowness and hypocrisy of all tall claims like Swachh Bharat, Beti Bachao Beti Padhao, MNREGA, PM Awas Yojana. The least the governments must do is to apologise to this family and ensure all their basic rights. □



Lockdown Emboldens Feudal, Communal and Criminal Forces

The long drawn Lockdown has left common people's lives in shambles which crores thrown towards starvation, migrants keep walking on roads, facing unemployment and wage losses, but at the same time this is apparent that the Bihar government has also unlocked the feudal communal forces by giving them a free hand to perpetrate crimes and let loose oppression. CPIML Bihar Secretary Kunal said that the morale of feudal-criminals is once again sky-high under the excuse of Corona and Lockdown, and by not curbing this rise of crime and oppression the Nitish government's complicity with such forces is being exposed once again. The attacks on dalits and poor are on the rise.

The lockdown and the right-wing hate campaigns are strengthening already existing tendencies of untouchability and discrimination against Dalits and Muslims, as well as towards Covid-19 victims. Attacks and social boycott of the poor and dalits by feudal forces have increased manifold. Spreading of communal hatred has also increased. The pandemic is being used as a weapon to justify the Brahminical system of social distancing. In the name of 'lockdown', all democratic values are being murdered and attempts are

being made to strengthen regressive caste structures.

The police in Bihar are unleashing brutal repression on the poor, workers, weaker sections, and even shopkeepers, sanitation workers and other working people who are risking their lives during the Lockdown to reach essential goods and services to the common people. The police must understand that people are coming out of their homes only in case of emergency. In Masaurhi in Patna District medical store owners were brutally lathi charged.

Massacre in Gopalganj

JP Yadav and his family faced a murderous attack by the BJP-JDU protected feudal-criminal Pandey gang on 24 May at Hathua Block in Gopalganj District. The mafia don Satish Pandey explicitly linked with communal Hindutva elements, Amarendra Pandey alias Pappu Pandey who is JDU MLA from Kuchaykot and Satish Pandey's son Mukesh Pandey a Zilla Panchayat member are involved in this incident.

JP Yadav is badly injured while three of his family members died in this brutal massacre. His 68 year old father Mahesh Yadav and 65 year old mother Sankeshiya Devi were killed on the spot while his 32 year old brother Sonu Yadav died on the way to hospital. JP Yadav is presently being treated at PMCH and his condition is said to be serious. JP Yadav has been associated with the CPIML but has not been active for a long time.

The CPIML has said that under Nitish Kumar's much hyped 'good governance' the entire Gopalganj District has come into the clutches of the Pandey gang, who are openly supported by the BJP-JDU. These killings are protected by the state machinery. Similar situation prevails in other districts too. The CPIML held a protest on 26 May at Gopalganj

district headquarters against this brutal massacre and demanded effective action without delay.

Minor Girl Student Gang Raped In Bhojpur

CPIML, AIPWA, AISA, RYA and Insaf Manch held a protest jointly on 29 April 2020 against the gang rape of a minor girl student by feudal-communal forces in Bhojpur district.

In Charpokhri Thana, Bhojpur, CPIML on 25 April when the girl was returning from giving her mother's clothes for stitching to a tailor suddenly she was waylaid and gang raped by four persons including Golu Pandey, Shivshankar, Krishna Rai (all from the same village).

There had been no medical examination of the victim till a CPIML team met the District SP and demanded of the same.

Attack on Dalit Tola in Kauriya, Bihta

On 22 May Shivaji Rai and his son beat up Bhola Ram, a dalit. The villagers immediately protested and also informed the Thana. The protest led to stone throwing from both sides and one stone hit the Daroga who had reached the spot. Later at around 11 PM in night a heavy police force along with members of the dominant sections attacked the dalit Tola. Dozens of people were injured and some had cracked skulls and broken arms. The Thana of its own volition registered a case against the dalits; another case was registered on behalf of the upper caste forces. A thumb impression was taken from one of the dalits forcibly by the police. Prior to this incident, an altercation regarding a game of cricket occurred in January between boys belonging to the Ravidas and Kurmi castes in which dalit boys were beaten up and a case was registered under the SC/

ST Act. On 14 May there was an incident of molestation of a 15 year old girl from the Ravidas caste after which the villagers gave a written complaint at the Bihata Thana. After two days the Thana called both the sides and counseled them. Thus, no FIR was registered. In the meanwhile the dominant sections snatched away the land on which dalits were farming, and stopped the water for their fields.

Police Repression and the Right-Wing Hate Campaigns

Abuse and intimidation of migrant workers who managed to reach Bihar by the police has become a regular feature. In Modanganj, Jehanabad District police accompanied by the DM and SP blindly beat up the villagers. The police entered the houses, climbed up to the terraces, and beat up the people. They even broke the hand pumps and whole tola was terrorised. When CPIML protested against this, Yogendra Yadav and 3 others were arrested and sent to jail.

In a similar situation at Bhore Block in Gopalganj, people's anger burst out because of the repressive behavior of the Bhore Circle Officer, Jitendra Kumar Singh who indiscriminately beaten up many people, many were badly injured. He had earlier beaten up and injured a 70-year old man, another 75-year old man who was left unconscious after beating. A third incident occurred at Vishrampur where two women going for work on mustard fields were beaten up. The fourth incident involved the beating up of two persons who were cooking; the Circle Officer also confiscated their vessels and gas stove. The angry villagers jammed the Bhore-Pirganj road in protest on 30 March and raised slogans against the goondism of the CO.

Patna District

Bihata: CPIML District Committee member Gopal Singh was prevented from entering the village and feudal dominant sections spread false propaganda that he was contagious and was responsible for the spread of Corona.

Sara Musahar Toli in Bhojpur: At least 6 people were seriously injured when feudal criminals attacked the Toli on 5 April. The ages of the injured ranged from 6 months to 50 years.

Reports have come in from several places of false propaganda against minorities in the name of Corona. A 30 year old Muslim youth suffering from asthma died in Ara Sadar Hospital due to negligence and wrong injection. The report showed him negative for Corona but the doctors accused he died of Covid19. False propaganda was rampant that Muslims are spreading Corona. Similar reports of anti-minority propaganda, police repression and feudal-criminal atrocities have also been reported from Gopalganj, Darbhanga, Jehanabad and Siwan. On 4 March Ashok Ram was shot in Siwan city. On 7 April Rinku Dubey (para teacher) was shot and died as a result. CPIML leader Rashida Khatoon was attacked by neighbors at the instigation of BJP members in Sadar Manigachhi.

AIARLA Bihar State Secretary Gopal Ravidas described how owner of Saraswati Pharma Rahul Kumar was returning home after closing his shop on 14 April when suddenly the DSP himself started beating him up. This angered other medical shopkeepers and they decided to go on strike. The police then went to Praveen Pharma and beat up the people working there and arrested the owner Praveen Kumar. Medical shopkeepers then held a protest rally and gheraoed the Thana.

In Patna District the CPIML Mukhiya Rajesh Gupta in Kanhauli was attacked. On 17 April at about 8 o'clock Rajesh Gupta got a phone call asking him to come out on some work. When he went to the said place, he was suddenly attacked and he and his son were seriously injured. All the attackers belong to an organization called Hindu Bhumi Putra run by Abhimanyu Yadav, son of BJP MP Ramkripal Yadav. The names of the other attackers were also specified by the CPIML leaders. Rajesh Gupta runs a government Quarantine Center in his area and had asked a group of workers—all Muslims—from Saharasa and other places to come to the Center. This angered the Hindu Bhumi Putra members who said Muslims are spreading Corona and should not be helped. The CPIML demanded arrest of the attackers and asked the government why it is not stopping such false propaganda against Muslims.

Similarly, sanitation workers were also brutally beaten up in Masaurhi, after which 60-70 sanitation workers went on strike. Other people beaten up by the police include acupressure doctor Pappu Thakur, tailor Rahmat Miyan, Naseem Miyan, and a person buying vegetables in Sigodi.

After observing Ambedkar Jayanti CPIML activists had arranged for food for 1000 people. But the police pounced on them, did lathi charge, wasted all the food and threatened to throw everyone into jail. The police also brutally beat up Rajnath Yadav (70) who had come to Dulhin Bazaar for medical treatment.

Brutal Attack by Feudal Forces in Noorchak

In Noorchak village is in Sigodi Thana, Patna District on 28 and 29 April the Bhat Brahmins repeatedly attacked the Dalit-Muslim Tola and

many people have been reported to be injured.

The dispute started on 28 April when 4-5 dominant Bhat youths arrived at the small shop run by Feku Miyan. Feku Miyan daughter Soharat Khatoon was sitting in the shop. The youths ate chocolate from the shop but refused to pay for it, even though they were already running high on credit. When Soharat asked for the payment, they started arguing with her. Feku Miyan and his younger son Tabrez Alam, who were nearby, came running to the shop. The dominant caste youths then started saying that Muslims are people who spread Corona, and they threatened to beat up Feku Miyan. When Feku Miyan's wife protested, they misbehaved with her also and a verbal altercation ensued. The dalit and minority communities then united to protest against this. Within a short time, the entire Brahmin community pounced on the dalit and Muslim Tola and started beating up people. Feku Miyan was injured and this was reported at the Thana but the Thana remained indifferent.

The Panchayat Mukhiya tried to calm things down, but after some time Ranjit Paswan was badly beaten up that he received serious injuries to his stomach.

On 29 April the dalit-Muslim Tola was again attacked, injuring at least 6 persons: Noor Jehan, w/o Feku Miyan; Soharat Khatoon (15) d/o Feku Miyan; Pratima Devi w/o Ramesh Paswan; Ramesh Paswan s/o Jitan Paswan; Munna Miyan f/o Kaish Miyan; and Anupa Devi w/o Devi Prasad Paswan.

If an FIR had been registered on 28 April itself and the culprits had been nabbed, the incident of 29 April would have been avoided. Despite repeated attacks, no FIR has been registered on the applications given by members of the dalit-Muslim communities. Instead,

the administration is threatening to register FIRs against CPIML leaders.

Bhojpur District

In Bhojpur District, feudals belonging to the Rajput caste are consistently creating an atmosphere of hate and venom against minorities and also attacking them. These dominant caste people have the open support and protection of local BJP MP RK Singh.

In the evening of 27 April at Kauda village in Jagdishpur Block,

Mohd Zaki Akhtar s/o Mohd Israr was badly beaten up by dominant forces. On 12 April at Siyarua village a Muslim family lives in the house of Chhotu Singh of the Rajput caste. The family consists of a painter, his wife and two children. Rajput feudal forces threatened the family to leave; they also threatened Chhotu Singh and said that he must remove the Muslim family from his house. Such incidents of attacks and threats against minorities have been reported from various villages in Bhojpur.

The CPIML leaders Kunal and Amar have said that the main reason behind these organized attacks and hate-mongering in the name of Corona is the communal politics of BJP-RSS. They want to use even the pandemic for communal purposes. CM Nitish Kumar, meanwhile, sits mute and does nothing. CPIML has appealed to the people not to be misled by BJP-RSS and to oppose and resist the economic-social boycott of minorities and face the current crisis together and united. □

Initiatives by Darbhanga CPIML for Workers Stranded in Uttar Pradesh

Immediately on receiving news of the pitiable condition of workers from Pratapgarh District in Uttar Pradesh who had been brought on agreement in November to work in the brick kiln at Pirdi Chakka in Bahadurpur Block, Darbhanga District. Their 'masters' were stopped from using them as bonded labor during the Lockdown through the initiatives of Party leaders and the Local Committee. They were 12 workers from Pratapgarh District near Allahabad, including Bablu Ram, Brajesh Ram, Ankit Ram, Maley Maurya, Dilip Kumar Ram, Gautam Paswan and Ram Naresh Saroj. Since work at the brick kiln had stopped, these workers were eking out a living by using their horse and cart to ferry hay from nearby farmers' fields. But the kiln owner found even this objectionable and he confiscated the cart tires and the horse. They were not given food on time and the kiln owner kept threatening to send them to jail. Party leaders took initiatives and brought them from the brick kiln to Sathe Math in Chhapra and made arrangements for their food and stay.

The workers, relating their woes, told us that as per the agreement they had been brought to the brick kiln to transport dry bricks till the month of June. They could work for only 2 months at the kiln. Brick making work at the kiln came to a standstill because of lack of workers. The workers requested the owner that they should be allowed to go home and they would repay whatever advance is in their name by working it off in the next season. But they were not allowed to leave, and they were not given any work either. Thus, they were finding it difficult even to get enough food. The administration was informed of this incident. The Zonal Officer came and met the workers in the evening and gave assurance for a prompt resolution of the issue. On 27 April the administration took initiative to arrange talks between CPIML leaders and the kiln owner. An agreement was reached during the talks that the kiln owner would look after all the workers, and after the Lockdown ended he would also make arrangements for the workers to be sent home. In case of any complaints in this period, the administration would be free to file a

case against the brick kiln. The kiln owner was made to return the workers' horse and cart. The debt of the workers amounting to more than Rs 1 lakh was cancelled. AIARLA leader Jangi Yadav said that he was satisfied that their initiatives had succeeded in obtaining justice for the workers.

Against Boycott of Muslim Vegetable Vendors

Chandanpatti village is next to Bekuli village in Darbhanga District. The Kunjda Muslim community forms a good part of the population here and they are engaged in the work of growing and selling vegetables. During the Lockdown some people, instigated by hatemongering by BJP-RSS, started stigmatizing them and forbidding them from coming into the village to sell their produce. CPIML activists took initiatives to discuss and debate with people on this issue and changed the atmosphere of hatred and boycott. The activists took initiatives to go and buy vegetables from this community, thus opening the market for them. Similarly, a market was organized for Muslim women in Pirdi village to sell their vegetables. Similar initiatives were taken in Basatpur village also. □

Will the Government Not Give Us Jobs?

Manoj Bhakt

“We were called today by phone. Having reached the station, they are now sending us back. They are saying that the train is full”. Soyna Munda is a worker in a construction company at Kanchipuram District of Tamil Nadu. His worry now is where he can go from here. “The company owner won’t allow us to go back in there, and we are not being allowed to stay here at the station either”.

Soyna is from Kuchai Block in Saraikela. He, along with 20 other workers, lives inside the construction company complex. These workers do the work of carrying concrete and other materials required for laying and pitching of roads. If they get work every day, their wages could be around Rs 9,000-10,000. After the Corona Lockdown they were allowed to live inside the company complex but they have to buy their own rations, and now they are faced with starvation.

According to a report dated 22 May 2020 in The Economic Times, more than 70% migrant workers still remain stranded despite 2050 Shramik Special trains being run. A large part of migrant workers from Jharkhand, Bengal, Odisha and other trains are still waiting in the expectation of trains to take them home. The Centre does not have any statistics on the total number of workers stranded due to the Lockdown. According to Rail Minister Piyush Goyal, 75% of the Shramik Special trains were for UP and Bihar. Instead of making adequate arrangements for trains and other transport for the return of workers, the Rail Minister took refuge in the politics of lies and

said that the non-BJP ruled State governments were refusing to let the trains enter their States.

The first phase of the Lockdown made it clear that the Modi government had imposed it without prior planning or preparation. The 2011 Census, the 2016-17 Government of India economic survey and estimates based on it put the number of inter-state migrant workers in 2018 at about 7-11 crores. The annual growth rate of inter-state migrant workers is 4.5%. If this is added to the number of inter-state migrant workers, the number will become more than double (Financial Express—Sarit Kumar Raut). A major part of migrant workers consists of unorganized workers, gig workers and very small traders with very little capital. This is the socio-economically weakest section of society and daily wages or daily earnings are their means of livelihood. This is not merely a question of availability of statistics or studies. From the beginning of the first phase of Lockdown, news of lack of food and rations and reports of starvation were coming from everywhere. The government was nowhere to be seen in this hour of crisis. The CPIML MLA in Jharkhand Vinod Singh started getting distress phone calls every day 24x7. Most of these calls were for immediate relief and for return home. As the days progressed, migrant workers started getting less and less response from other officials, MPs and MLAs; and the CPIML MLA’s mobile number became the most-trusted helpline number for the migrant workers.

MLA and PB member Vinod Singh put consistent pressure on

Chief Minister Hemant Soren to deposit an immediate assistance amount in the bank accounts of the migrant workers. He suggested that MLA Funds could be used for this. Initially the government wanted to limit the assistance amount to the MLA Funds alone. This would have enabled only a very small part of the workers to get assistance. After consistent pressure the government agreed to put Rs 1000 into every worker’s account, and there are reports that more than 2 lakh workers have received assistance. Compared to the huge crisis the workers are facing, this amount is very paltry. The monthly income of most of these workers is between 5,000 and 10,000. The Lockdown swallowed up 2 months’ income/wages. It is outrageous that the Modi government has till date no plans of giving them direct cash help. Far from anything special for them in Modi’s 20 lakh crore package, migrant workers have been pushed clean even out of the margins.

CPIML leader Ajit Patil says, “Initially we tried to help the workers ourselves, but after two or three days we realized how serious the matter was. No government had any preparation for handling this. Lack of rations was the biggest problem facing migrant workers. We asked the workers for a list of their employers. We put pressure on the employers and also contacted the concerned officials. Trade unions and Lal Nishan Party helped us a lot. We could help only about 10000-12000 workers, and there are lakhs more stranded workers in Mumbai”.

Sadrul from the Jharkhand

Ekta Sangh in Mumbai and also associated with CPIML says, "We arranged rations for about 2,500 workers at our own cost. We contacted the authorities to solve their problems and also put the workers in contact with community kitchens. There was no one to take care of migrant workers. People from other sections could go to the doctor if they fell ill, but migrant workers had no access to medical treatment. Lack of rations and fear of Corona left them no option except to try and go home. But even going home was near-impossible due to the Lockdown".

CPIML did not delay in understanding the situation and taking initiatives accordingly. At the central level the Party created a Whats-App group 'Help Lockdown Affected' through which the Party is reaching all corners of the country and trying to help stranded migrant workers through supporters and affiliated organizations.

"We sat on dharna for 5 days demanding trains. The police beat us with lathis. When the Karnataka government stopped trains from taking migrant workers home, Comrade Clifton went to court and the government had to revoke its order", says Saddam Husain who is back from Mangalore in his village Harkund and is now in quarantine. His village Devri is in a remote area in Giridih, Jharkhand. Saddam used to work in a small hotel in Mangalore and used to earn about Rs 10,000 every month.

Comrade Clifton D'Rozario is a CC member of CPIML and the Karnataka State Secretary. Along with some civil society organizations and public minded individuals, he and CPIML comrades were always available to help migrant workers stranded in Karnataka. He says, "The people here have trusted us and so we are playing a leading

role in helping stranded workers. Yesterday (22 May) I requested my lawyer friends to help stranded workers in Shimoga. They reached there in ten minutes and helped the workers. We have won another big victory for migrant workers. We had gone to court for free train travel for migrant workers. The Karnataka government said in court that they did not have the funds for this. Despite this, the court replied that it is the duty of the government to send penniless people home at their cost; and the government had to agree to this. Today (23 May) the Karnataka government has made all the trains starting from there free, all those who had paid for their travel today will be refunded".

After the announcement of Lockdown.2, the workers lost hope and became desperate. Comrade Ajit Patil says that the government agencies were taking 15 to 20 days for rations to reach even those who were on the list of migrant workers eligible for rations. With barely one meagre meal a day, the workers had no option except to start walking home. 55 to 60 people would be crammed like animals in a single truck and they would have to pay Rs 5000-7000 for a ride from Mumbai to Jharkhand. Many workers had to ask for money to be sent from their homes for food or for their return home. Less than 10% of the total number of migrant workers from Jharkhand has come home by train so far.

On 8 May 20 workers were run over by a train at Aurangabad and 16 of them died. Exactly one week later on 16 May at 3 AM 24 migrant workers from Jharkhand, Bihar, Bengal and UP walking home from Rajasthan were killed in a horrific road accident. 11 of the workers killed were from Bokaro in Jharkhand. 31 workers walking to Garhwa from Andhra Pradesh were

stopped Sukma in Chhattisgarh. Neither food nor transport was being arranged for them. There was hardly any road in Jharkhand through which an incessant stream of desperate workers was not walking home. News of accidents was coming in all the time. Despite this, the Modi government did nothing to help the workers.

Most of the workers who managed to return to their home States are at present in quarantine centers. But the Hemant Soren government has washed its hands of responsibility by ordering home quarantine. Many workers live in single room houses and home quarantine is tantamount to no quarantine. It is not difficult to understand how dangerous the consequences of this will be. Corona tests have made it clear that a large part of the returning workers could be infected. The number of positive cases in Garhwa, Hazaribagh, Bokaro, Santhal Parganas, Giridih, Singhbhum and other Districts is on the rise. Many State governments are arranging food, sanitizers, mosquito nets etc. at quarantine centers. The failure of the Jharkhand government to arrange quarantine centers and the neglect of migrant workers will have grave consequences.

"There are 7 members in my family and I am the sole earning member. How can we go outside to earn a living until everything becomes all right again? And if I don't go out to work, how shall I support my family?" Arun Ram is very worried. He is from Paalmo in Jamua, Giridih (Jharkhand). He used to work in a go-down in Delhi at Rs 8000 per month. He did not get the salary for April, and his March salary got spent for food and his return home.

Pokhan Singh from Lukaiya in Bagodar (Jharkhand) is a sand

worker in Mumbai, earning 7000-8000 per month. "The 'Seth' (employer) was asking me to remain there and work but without salary. Here also in the school (quarantine center) food is coming from home. But how long can food come from home? When I get out of here we can't manage unless I find some work".

Like the Corona pandemic, the fear of unemployment is getting

deeper and deeper. Migrant workers usually send almost their entire income home and do some extra work to somehow manage their own needs in their State of migration. Income from migrant workers is an important part of Jharkhand's rural economy. The Lockdown will shatter the entire rural economy. The announcements made so far by governments have not addressed this issue. 25 year

old Churaman Turi says, "We are capable of doing all kinds of work. We'll have to find work here itself. Will the government not give us employment?"

That is the biggest question today. The answer to this question is not to be seen in government announcements. The answer is to be found somewhere in the struggles emerging in rural areas for rations, health and shelter. □

Giridih's Prosperity was due to Migrant Workers' Income: Vinod Singh

(Excerpts from an interview with Jharkhand MLA and CPIML Politburo member Vinod Singh.)

Q: From the beginning of the Lockdown to the present fourth phase of Lockdown, where do migrant workers stand today?

Vinod Singh: All migrant workers haven't yet been able to return home. Those who have returned are living in appalling conditions in schools or tents, because there are no government arrangements for quarantine.

Q: Just 2 or 3 days after the Lockdown was announced, migrant workers started facing lack of rations. To what extent were the steps taken by the government for this adequate? What was your (and your Party's) role in this?

VS: Daily wage earners were especially distressed from the early days of the Lockdown. The concerned States did not make good arrangements. From the beginning our Party put pressure on the government for DBT (Direct Benefit Transfer). But the government delayed it too long and even then gave only Rs 1000; and the mode was also quite technical, so only about 2 lakh workers from Jharkhand could

receive the money in their accounts. After getting information from us our Party comrades, with help and cooperation from some NGOs and individuals, helped the workers. In many villages where the Party has a strong base our comrades and friends collected money and sent it to needy workers.

Q: Many migrant workers have become infected by COVID. Please comment on their check-up and medical treatment.

VS: The positive cases among migrant workers who have returned to Jharkhand are on the rise. Testing is very limited as of now. Only those who have come in direct contact are being tested. The test reports also take a long time to come; as long as a week.

Q: What are the immediate problems faced by migrant workers who have returned and their families?

VS: The problem of employment is a huge one. Rural disputes have increased. The sparkle, the prosperity of Jharkhand, especially Giridih, was due to the income that came from migrant workers. The market was also connected to this. This has been badly shattered. □

Comrade Vinod Singh managed relief works in his constituency and for thousands of stranded migrants stuck in other states



Migrant Workers of Jharkhand Stranded in Maharashtra During Lockdown

Shyam Gohil

COVID-19 in India brought doom in its wake for migrant workers. Lockdown was announced without any planning or preparation and without giving any time for making arrangements. Initially the workers could not assess the situation but soon they realized that they and their families could not survive without governmental or non-governmental help. Many people who knew about our Party, especially workers from Jharkhand who had long-time contact with Bagodar MLA Vinod Singh, started contacting us for help. Party comrades very soon realized the enormity of the situation. A Help Lockdown Affected Whats-App group was immediately created to message our comrades and activists in other States for help for stranded workers. Activists in our field of work and members of people's organizations were added to this group. As a result they got news of stranded workers in their States. The Jharkhand Ekta Sangh became active in Mumbai for migrant workers from Jharkhand. Comrade Sadrul Shiekh played a very important role in this. Initially we were worried how we would cope with this situation, but Comrade Patil directly contacted Collectors and Nodal Officers in Maharashtra and requested them for help with stranded workers.

Daily wage earners, construction workers, garment workers, workers from all sectors reached out for help in Mumbai. The largest number of workers is in Antop Hill, Wadala and Dharavi, and many of these are from

Jharkhand. Initially our Jharkhand comrades tried to help them by personally providing rations, but soon they realized that the number of workers who needed help was beyond the level of help on a personal capacity. Their economic resources were finished in just one week. Unorganized sector workers needed help and rations in industrial areas like Mumbai, Thane, Navi Mumbai, Bhiwandi, Nagpur, Amaravati, Pune and Kolhapur. Comrade Ajit Patil worked out a strategy to know the number of workers, contact them, learn their problems and work for a solution. We demanded that all workers in Maharashtra should receive rations even if they did not have ration cards.

AICCTU leaders in Aurangabad helped about 2000 road construction workers to receive help from the District Collector. Our comrades helped workers in Nagpur and Amaravati. We put pressure on the government to hear the woes and help sugar cane workers in Vidarbha, many of whom are Marathi dalits and Muslims.

We were in direct contact with workers and understood their distress to a great extent and were able to put consistent pressure on the authorities for rations and financial assistance for them. We also tried to put pressure on contractors and employers to pay the workers their wages. Providing cooked meals did not prove practical because it entailed crowds of workers gathering at one place, and often had to face lathi charge by the police.

Garment workers, zari workers, goldsmiths etc. are mostly from Bengal. Naka workers, construction workers etc. are mostly dalits, and a large number of them are women. All the workers were in grave financial straits. Many people had come to the city for treatment of cancer or other serious illnesses, and were now stranded with their families.

The situation changed in the 4th phase of Lockdown. Now all are desperate to go home. Arrangements made by the government were highly inadequate and very complicated. Workers found the online form registration process too difficult. We helped them with filling in the forms as well as following them up, which was needed because of the lethargy of the police and the administration and rampant corruption. Many workers who did not receive help with their forms landed at the railway station only to be greeted by the lathis of the police. Finally, the poor and the helpless workers decided to walk home as there was no other option. Some borrowed money at high interest and started for home in private buses or trucks. Many fell prey to agents who take money on the promise of arranging transportation.

Even today, there are many helpless stranded workers still trying to get home. They need help to get back home. When the workers reach their home State, they need help to get relief and employment. We must plan ahead and see how they can be helped. □

Lockdown Relief Reports from Uttar Pradesh

Protests and Repression

CPIML had given the call for clanging on empty plates for 10 minutes at midday on 12 April 2020 to draw the attention of the government to the empty plates of the poor and to demand free rations and essentials for the poor.

On the eve of the program, Sitapur Party District in-charge Arjun Lal was arrested from his home and detained at the Hargaon Thana. He was released later but the next morning he was put under house arrest and the police left his house only after the time for the program was over.

AICCTU had called for a 2-day hunger strike on 18 and 19 April as a countrywide protest in solidarity with migrant workers. This call was supported by CPIML and AIARLA also. Responding to the call, CPIML Faizabad in-charge Comrade Atique and 3 other comrades observed a hunger strike at his home while maintaining physical distancing, also posting this information on social media. The Ayodhya Kotwali police arrested Atique and 3 other comrades (2 of them women) and released them on bail only late in the evening.

Similarly, AICCTU leader Comrade Rambharose's brother was arrested at Maharajganj Thana along with 5 workers for sitting on dharna and kept at the Thana overnight. Since the police were looking for Rambharose, he voluntarily gave himself up the next morning and joined his arrested comrades. They were all released on bail in the evening.

Whenever the Party prepares for a protest program in Ghazipur District, the administration posts

police guard at the CPIML District office so that nobody is allowed to go out. This behavior of the administration has been witnessed on the last 2 or 3 occasions.

Before the start of the Lockdown, students and youth activists were arrested and jailed in Lucknow during the anti-CAA protests. AISA Uttar Pradesh Vice President Nitin Raj was arrested for supporting the dharna by women at Ghantaghar in Lucknow. Ashwini Yadav was arrested for putting up a poster in Hazratganj. The case against Nitin Raj and 22 other named persons are filed under Sections 66 (IT Act) and IPC 505, 427, 353, 283, 188, 149, 147 and 145. The case against Ashwini Yadav and 2 other named persons is registered under Sections 505 (1) (b), 12/3 Press and registration of Books Act 1867 and 3-Act against Destruction of Public Property 1964.

They were kept in jail for more than 3 weeks and released on parole for 2 months in the light of Supreme Court Corona directives.

Responding to the Party's call for a National Protest Day on 19 May 2020, dharna protests were held at various Districts in Uttar Pradesh, maintaining physical distancing and other Lockdown rules. Dharnas were held at Bhadohi, Duduwa Dharmapur, Lucknow, Hardasi Khera, Munshi Khera, Bakshi Talab, 6 Tehsils in Azamgarh District, Lakhimpur Kheeri, paliya, Mirzapur, Sonbhadra, Varanasi, Chandauli, Ghazipur, Ballia, Devariya, Mau, Gorakhpur, Allahabad, Faizabad, Jaunpur, Pilibhit, Sitapur, Kanpur, Jalaun, Mathura, Rae Bareilly, and Moradabad. State Secretary Sudhakar Yadav and other leaders addressed the dharnas at different

places and demanded answers from the Modi government for the betrayal of the poor, workers, farmers and small traders in the name of the 'relief package'.

In response to the call by AICCTU and AIARLA hunger strikes were observed on 19 April at various places in the District. Party Foundation Day was observed on 22 April. AIPWA and AIARLA programs were organized on 23 April and 27 April respectively. A District Committee was held on 29 April. May Day and Karl Marx Jayanti were observed on 1 May and 5 May respectively. Branch meetings are being held at various Party Branch offices.

Lockdown Relief Work

The Varanasi Mohalla kitchen has been running successfully and providing hygienic food for the needy (see detailed report below). Similarly, AISA is organizing a kitchen in Allahabad with people's help and supplying packed food to needy families. RYA activists are carrying out a similar kitchen initiative for disbursement of food in Gorakhpur.

With contributions from Party supporters, needy families were supplied rations in Lucknow. Lists were sent to voluntary organizations supportive of the Party for rations to needy workers. About 200 families were provided rations with Party initiatives. Lists of workers and bank accounts were prepared and sent to the Labor Department officials so that money could be put into their accounts. Migrant workers returning home on the roads were provided refreshment packets at the Kamta crossroad on the Lucknow-Gorakhpur highway.

Dry rations were collected with

help from people's contributions and distributed to urban poor and needy families in Rae Bareilly. Lists of people without ration cards were made and arrangements were made for them to receive rations and other essentials at Mirzapur, Azamgarh, Sitapur and other Districts.

Azamgarh

Party initiatives in the District continue despite the Lockdown. There are large scale irregularities in the government announcement for free rations to the poor. A very large section of the poor does not have ration cards, and even those

who had cards were denied rations on some excuse or the other. Through Party initiatives, lists of people denied rations were made and this was made an issue on social media. The administration was pressurized into disbursing rations in 8 bastis of Musahar and the poor.

Recently hail storms created havoc and destruction at villages in 2 Tehsils, Nizamabad and Budhanpur, destroying crops as well as homes and tin sheds. The Party made this a strong issue and forced the administration into action.

Varanasi

After the Lockdown, the situation became very bad for the common people. Apart from hunger and joblessness, they had to face beatings and inhuman behavior by the police. Through Party initiatives we distributed rations to 70 families. The Mohalla kitchen organized by the Party provided food for large numbers of needy families and migrant workers. Construction workers and auto drivers were helped by putting pressure on the administration resulting in Rs 1000 being put into their accounts.

The Varanasi Mohalla Kitchen Experience

Manish Sharma

The sudden lockdown imposed on 23 March struck a severe blow on the livelihood of many daily-wagers, poor, sick and old people. With little or no government aid in sight, these sections of the population were staring at imminent starvation. At this point, CPI ML Varanasi intervened by forming a collective of about a dozen organizations which included AISA, Bhagat Singh Chhatra Morcha (BCM), AISF, Nagrik Adhikar Manch, United Against Hate, AICCTU, AIPWA, All India Secular Forum etc. Many young people, who had been part of the anti-CAA movement led by our party till the pandemic attack struck, enthusiastically joined the campaign to provide relief to the needy. A dedicated Whatsapp group was formed for communicating and dissemination of information about the relief work and an appeal was made to the people of Varanasi to contribute fund to a bank account. The response of the citizenry was overwhelming. Within a couple of days, sufficient fund had poured in



and the relief team started preparing food packets comprising of wheat flour, rice, pulses, spices, oil, potato and a soap. At the time when there was a great fear about the spread of the virus, the team, following the norms of physical distancing, set a fine example of putting service before self. The party office was buzzing with activities related to procurement and packaging of the relief material. Small teams would then distribute the packets amongst the most vulnerable sections of the

population. The localities where the relief material was distributed were Shivpur, Bhojpur, Pakki Bazar, Nadesar, Bajardiha etc.

This daily distribution continued for about two weeks. During this activity, when the volunteers were going among the needy, they observed that many sanitary staff who were cleaning the city did not have proper protective kit and were at a great risk of getting infected. Thereafter, masks, hand gloves, sanitizers were distributed among the sanitary staff.

It was realized that while practising physical distancing, social bonding between people was the need of the hour. With this idea, the relief team members came up with a plan of setting up mohalla or neighbourhood Kitchens. Before starting a kitchen, a meeting of local volunteers of that mohalla decided on the logistics of operation: where would the food be cooked, who would arrange for the utensils, who would make a list of the needy families - all these issues were addressed collectively.

An important component of this kitchen was resource generation. The local volunteers were involved in fund collection from neighbouring well-to-do residential colonies. Any shortfall in resources was taken care of from the fund generated by the central relief team which could collect about 5 lakh rupees from the citizens of Varanasi. Initially, four mohalla kitchens started and operated successfully for a few

days. However, it was the mohalla kitchen of Manyawar Kanshi Ram Awas Yojana that could be sustained longest, and is continuing for the last 43 days as we write this report.

From the volunteer teams of the mohalla kitchen, 35 members have enrolled as CPIML members. Preliminary work has been initiated for formation of Auto-rickshaw Drivers' Union, Domestic Workers' Union, Construction Workers'

Union etc. In this time of crises, the work done by the volunteers has generated strong bonds of camaraderie between the residents of the Mohalla and they have begun to discuss among themselves the socio- political reasons for their deplorable living conditions. They are now getting mobilized to demand employment from the local administration by submitting a memorandum on this issue. □

CPIML Activities in Kerala during the Lockdown

Venu

As lockdown was declared all over the country on 24th March without any preparation or clear-cut administrative vision to ease the impending adverse consequences on millions of migrant workers stuck in various parts of the country, fears loomed large over the plight of sections of poor, unorganised workers, small traders, daily wage earners and particularly that of migrant workers stuck in Kerala. At this point of time, the state administration was facing the formidable challenge of taking most urgent steps in containing the Covid-19 pandemic within manageable limits before it entered to the next stage of community transmission.

Following the lockdown, the Chief Minister of Kerala Comrade Pinarayi Vijayan had reiterated the state government's commitment to ensure that lockdown wages would be fully paid by the employers in each establishment and that dismissal and retrenchment of employees would not be allowed. In his televised press meetings, the Chief Minister also reassured that there were ample stocks of food items and other essential commodities and there was no need for the public to be anxious

about short supply of such items. For daily wage earners who do not work under a particular employer, and other sections of poor and marginalized, the Chief Minister declared that additional free rations to all these sections would be distributed to compensate their loss of work and income due to lockdown. He categorically made an important announcement that no one in the state including the guest workers would go hungry due to the lockdown. In accordance to the government's policy of extending help to all who have been rendered without work and earnings, community kitchens were established all over the state thanks to the combined efforts of local administrations and labour, revenue and police departments. In the successful organisation and running of these community kitchens, women in Kudumbashree (SHGs units), ASHA workers and anganvadi workers played a most significant role.

In addition to the above mentioned categories, young volunteers were also recruited at local administration bodies wards' level and exclusively with the purpose of carrying out the state government's fight against Covid-19

with optimum inputs of man power keeping with the norms of physical distancing, hygiene, and personal protection. Severe restrictions were also imposed on members of the general public venturing out of their homes and protocols such as mask-wearing were also enforced.

It is in the above scenario that the extra-precarious plight of lockdown affected migrant workers attracted attention in Kerala as well, as happened all over the country. Hardly two days had passed since declaration of lockdown, messages began pouring in from at least some of the 5000 pus migrant worker camps in Kerala seeking solutions for problems for food. In many social media platforms as well the issue was raised by activists. However, near total absence of matching reports in newspapers and television channels was conspicuous. Added to this, there was also kind of euphoria among the general public that everything was going well thanks to the LDF government's preparedness and leadership. While the government of Kerala was far ahead of its counterparts in mobilizing and organizing relief and taking it up to hundreds of thousands of lockdown affected migrant workers, it is also

worth mentioning that the enormous goodwill and support it drew from the public also helped this happen. Even in such a situation, there were many lacunae particularly in the case of fool proof arrangements in solving the crisis of food experienced mainly by daily wage earners among the migrant workers.

Comrades in Kerala together with few activists and progressive minded individuals helped organize a WhatsApp group named 'Migrant Workers Help Group' on 26 March. This group comprises nearly 100 members from all over Kerala who would primarily connect the distraught workers with various government helplines and officials. Comrades working through this platform could bring to the notice of the government certain shortcomings including the inadequacies in addressing the most pressing problem of delivering food ration to all migrant workers.

While the government could insist companies and big contractors to provide lockdown wages and food for migrant workers, there was a large number of daily wage earners, construction workers and helpers who were rather working independently, without being under any big contractor, and working in many informal / unorganized sectors. These workers stay in rented apartments and many of them did not have automatic access to community kitchens either, even while they were out of work and out of any source of income. Owners of buildings that house them were required (through the labour department) by the government to provide food to their tenants.

These building owners were also prohibited from demanding rent from the labourers. In the absence of any substantial backing up or assurance by the government, many of the building owners were either


reluctant or genuinely incapable of taking such a burden beyond a few days. In such matters, there was confusion all around as to who would provide food in cases where the building owners would not or could not. It was precisely on such occasions that migrant workers would get connected with members of our group to place their grievances. Consequently, in many cases Labour Officers and Local Bodies authorities, Revenue dept officials and other officials at the helplines state and district levels had sincerely done their part in solving many specific problems. Many cases of migrant workers in need were referred to us by the all India network of CPIML and AICCTU comrades. Solutions have been possible in most of these Kerala based cases due to the perseverance of Kerala comrades until some actions were taken by the authorities.

Apart from problems of food, migrant workers also critically needed assistance in solving the big problem of information gap between them and the respective governments in their home states. When various state governments issue notifications or launch specific mobile Apps through which concerned state's migrant workers would be promised of financial assistance, informed of the facility and methods for booking tickets in Shramik Special trains, the workers stuck in faraway places either would not know of them at all or would get only a vague idea. In such cases, our quick responses to their queries and interventions to connect through the government help lines and also spreading such authentic messages among the workers have been quite useful.

An occasion when our comrades through their perseverance and ability to co-ordinate from within and with several state government

agencies was when a young worker from Bardhaman district died after being admitted to the Calicut Medical College. The deceased migrant worker had a history of treatment in the same hospital for a cardiac ailment but due to Covid -19 related exigencies, there was initial apprehension if the body could be brought to his close relatives in his village or if at all a decent funeral could be arranged. Thanks to our persistent efforts and involvement and co-operation by all officials concerned, each kind of anticipated difficulty was successfully overcome. We were able not only to get an ambulance arranged but also got sanctioned by the labour department the most needed relief of Rs 50,000 towards the ambulance charges. Without active involvement and participation of everybody concerned the ambulance could not have cleared of all obstacles and restrictions in crossing interstate borders particularly while the vehicle was returning back to Kerala from Bardhaman.

Our campaigns and protests during lockdown

The Kerala comrades could actively participate in most campaigns and protest programmes called by the central committee during the lockdown period. Besides, the message of building peoples' unity against Modi government's anti-labour and anti-poor policies was conveyed to larger sections of people through our social media platforms. Two newly created open face book groups one each in the name of Kerala Party and AICCTU Kerala have been very effective in reaching larger audiences and propagating the party vision among the masses with some degree of success. 

Initiatives in Tamil Nadu During Lockdown

Chandra Mohan

The Modi government's unplanned and abrupt Lockdown - 1.0 on 25 March left thousands and thousands of migrant workers stranded on the streets of Tamilnadu, right from Chennai Central Railway station to remote villages of the state. According to the CC guidance, a HELP DESK to address Migrant workers issues was immediately formed on 26th. We received hundreds of distress calls and messages from migrant workers mainly belonging to Jharkhand, Bihar, Odisha, West Bengal, Assam and UP stranded at Chennai Region covering four districts and Tirupur – Coimbatore region.

Due to lockdown all the industries and business houses were closed abruptly, millions of migrant workers immediately lost their food & shelters. Small companies, hotels, and contractors mercilessly threw them out. Police harassment was at its worst against migrant workers who were desperately rushing in search of some transport.

A Help desk in Tamil Nadu was formed with some CCMs, SCMs and TU activists, including Comrades Desikan and Varadhan, led by Comrade Chandra Mohan. Hindi was a major problem, still we managed with one Hindi speaking comrade Ponnudurai! We contacted migrant workers every day and listened to their grievances. In many places, Food/Ration, shelters become the immediate requirements of stranded Migrant Labour. For many workers, the company accommodation was lost. And in some places, landlords evicted the workers. Pending wage arrears were not paid, and contractors fled.

Relief Operations and Our Approach

In conditions of Lockdown, when movements were restricted, we effectively combined the services of various groups of left and democratic friends and some philanthropic volunteer groups in addition to our own trade union and party units and also effectively used social media to undertake relief activities that benefitted several thousands of workers for immediate relief. We also attempted to form Corona Disaster Relief Committees at the grassroots level involving intellectuals and democratic individuals in addition to our own party comrades. Party branches were also active in this effort through such relief committees.

Migrant labour relief operations were extensively undertaken in several districts, particularly Kanyakumari, Pudukottai, Coimbatore and also more than 20 centres in Chennai, including Ambattur, Thirumullaivoyal, Palavakkam, Sholinganallur, Irunkaattukottai (Sriperumpudur), Saidapet, Thiruvottiyur, Puzhal, Red Hills, Madhavaram, Kodambakkam, Purasawakkam, Otteri, Perambur, Kilpauk, etc.. and many other places. We have also arranged shelters for thousands of migrant labourers by pressurising administration. We reached out to thousands of migrant labourers in Tirupur, Coimbatore and also Erode districts, began with supplying rations, involved administration and worked for them till they get Lockdown wages and also helped for their return home. We helped people even in far away places like Valparai and some in and around tea estates. Our

Loading-Unloading Workers Union of the Civil Supplies Corporation also played a significant role in various districts.

In addition to providing some immediate relief to workers in need of shelter and ration, we focussed our efforts primarily on bringing state administration into its role so that supplies to migrant workers are not disrupted for the entire period of Lockdown. Generally, several groups were only providing relief whenever they got some distressed calls which is also, no doubt, a commendable job. We also did the same but also involved in all problems of workers, including ration, shelter, wage and employment issues and also return of migrant workers.

We resolved the problems of around 100 groups, each group comprising of anything from 5 to 200 migrant workers. We reached out to more than 10,000 workers in and around Chennai covering four districts, as well as the Tirupur and Coimbatore region. After arranging food / Ration as immediate relief, lists were prepared and submitted to concerned local government authorities for continuous supply of ration and grocery. In some cases, our TU functionaries directly went and distributed food / groceries. We actively intervened in addressing such issues in the entire state by contacting police officials, house owners, small company owners, government officials are contacted. In several cases of migrant workers including granite workers of Dindigul and Krishnagiri districts, our direct intervention ensured compensation for the lockdown period.

Some Experiences

Migrant workers joined protest Calls

On April 17 and 18, AICCTU observed All India protest day. In 7 places at Chennai region, migrant workers of Tripura, West Bengal, Bihar & Jharkhand joined our call, sat in dharna and were threatened by police for the protest. Several hundreds of migrant workers joined the call in Tirupur – Coimbatore region as well. A police case was also filed against our activist Abraham in Tambarm. SC Members Iraniappan, Thirunavukarasu & Ponnudurai played a key role.

In corporate construction company where more than 100 workers were not provided food or ration, we spoke to the management and also the contractor. Workers received a food allowance of Rs 100 per day because of our intervention. We also told them to pay Lockdown wages.

NLC Contract workers

Around 560 workers belonging to Bihar, Obra constituency, were stranded around Neyveli Lignite Corporation (NLC) of Tamilnadu. We contacted them, our Cuddalore party district secretary visited in person to speak to workers. Lockdown wages and safe return were their issues. We spoke to the Contractor who initially dodged the issue. We then approached the Labour department, local government officials and also the NLC management. In the meantime, workers also resorted to protest against the NLC management in front of the NLC administration gates. Finally, we negotiated with the contractor to settle wage arrears and told them to bear the costs of the train fare as well. Wage arrears for the days they worked were cleared while NLC management agreed to pay the Lockdown period

wage subsequently. A Shramik special train was arranged for all 236 workers and they safely returned to Bihar. It's a team work of our CCMs as well as SC members. Even Puducherry comrades submitted a memorandum through Assistant Labour Commissioner (Central), Puducherry, to address the problems with the NLC management.

Odisha Migrant workers at Coimbatore

Spinning Mills at Coimbatore (Kovai) and knitting companies at Tirupur employ lakhs of Migrant workers with cheap labour. Mill owners are not willing to send migrant workers back home.

The Kovai party committee intervened in many migrant workers cases including one case of kidney failure of a Odisha worker who was hospitalised in Kovai GH. We intervened, represented to district administration and a safe train journey was arranged for the patient.

KPR Spinning mill, Odisha Tribal women workers issue

KPR group of companies is a major private player employing thousands of migrant women workers. Our district leaders contacted the mill management at Thekkalur where 75 women Odisha women workers are forced to work and were denied their return home. The management tried to conceal this entire matter. We got the message through social media about the exploitation and oppression against young women workers in the company. We represented to district collector to make an enquiry which confirmed our claim. We demanded their Salary arrears, safe train journey and also intensive exploitation of 12 hour work. At last, salary arrears is said to be

cleared and their journey is being ensured. This is an interesting experience of coordination between our comrades in Tamil Nadu and friends and comrades from Odisha to pressurise authorities from both sides. Otherwise, the management was using local authorities to discourage workers from leaving for home so as to protect their own profit at the cost of workers lives.

Oil Seed Farm Workers of Pudukottai

In the course of intervention in migrant labour issues, agricultural workers of government seed oil farm were paid long pending wage arrears to the tune of Rs 25 lakhs because of our intervention that pressurised local administration. In another farm, workers were paid Rs. 17 lakhs of pending wage arrears.

Tamil Migrant workers issues in Other States

The issue of Tamil Migrant workers stranded at Maharashtra, Karnataka & Kerala was taken up and our concerned Help desks were informed. In Maharashtra, Solapur district, Pandarpur, around 600 Tamil workers were stranded. Our Maharashtra comrades immediately intervened, Deputy collector visited and workers were provided food & shelter. Later, they were sent back to Tamilnadu through special train.

Sugarcane cutting workers of Dharmapuri district stranded at Karnataka were rescued by our Karnataka unit and necessary arrangements for travel were made through administration.

200 Tamil Tribal workers employed in Kerala Brick kilns got food and shelter which was facilitated by the party's Kerala unit. Later, their return journey also was confirmed through combined initiatives of comrades of both states.

Joining Central Calls

All calls of the party central committee were implemented in Tamil Nadu without any exception. Even continuous repression by the state against our leaders and activists for protest, despite observing Lockdown guidelines, did not deter our participation.

On 12 April, the plate banging protest against hunger was the first protest programme during Lockdown. It was a first experience to operate in such a way. Police went to every house, illegally photographed protestors and filed cases, particularly in Pudukottai. Cases were filed against more than 35 leading activists including 15 women. Hundreds of people participated all over the state.

On 14 April, Ambedkar Memorial Day was observed everywhere by unfurling, garlanding photos and thus paying tribute to Dr Ambedkar jointly by the Left parties. Pledge taking audio was recorded and circulated. On the same evening, Com Balasundaram, CCM delivered a talk on Ambedkar and also pledge taking was administered through Facebook live.

On 18-19 April, Dharna and Hunger Strike in solidarity with migrant workers was observed, with impressive participation everywhere. On 22 April - Foundation Day Pledge taking videos were recorded and comrades took pledge from wherever they were locked down. On 23 April, the AIPWA dharna and fast against hate and hunger was observed everywhere. On 25 April, AISARYA Demonstrate against state repression.

27 April was a joint demonstration by AIARLA-AIKM demanding NREGA wages, work and also ration for all those without ration cards and also in solidarity with migrant labourers. From 28

April-3 May, Demand Weeks and days were observed by workers of various sectors including construction workers, scheme workers, sanitation workers, railway workers, etc..

On May Day, Flag Hoisting and Pledge Taking under conditions of Lockdown. Factories had by then started operations. So, workers hoisted red flags in factory gates, work places, residential localities and hamlets and also in their house rooftops and doors. There was a spirited participation of thousands of workers all over the state.

State and Sector specific Struggles

Significantly, in order to highlight workers cause, some special initiatives at district level like 'Demand Day was also observed by various sections of people on various dates, rural workers demonstration called on 15 May by AIARLA and AIKM saw mass participation in districts like Villupuram – Kallakurichi and Pudukottai and the same was carried on in Nagapattinam, Thanjavur, Mayiladuthurai, Cuddalore districts. Various unorganised workers including Beedi workers, washermen, powerloom workers also demonstrated to highlight their demands. Construction workers of Salem demonstrated in front of labour office on 21st May.

State Repression in Tamil Nadu

AIADMK state government of Tamil Nadu led by Edapadi Palani Sami (EPS) is virtually running a police state. Several hundreds of cases have been slapped against our party and trade union activists all over the state for expressing dissent against the actions of state and for

solidarity with migrant labourers, despite observing Lockdown norms. Several such cases are filed against us even without our knowledge by downloading photos and details from party's Facebook account and other individual comrades accounts. We are only hearing reports that cases are being indiscriminately filed against us for every programme in every district. False cases are foisted against all leading comrades, including comrade Shankar, PBM and all India president of AICCTU, Asaithambi, CCM and Pudukottai district secretary, Desikan, SCM and state General Secretary of AICCTU, etc., for protesting inside the party offices and houses, observing Lockdown norms. More than 40 cases are filed against our activists in Pudukottai out of which 20 are women. Perhaps, highest number of cases are filed against women activists this time. Several cases are filed against people for expressing solidarity with the cause of migrant labour even sitting at home. Police has even forcibly entered activists' houses, photographed the protest with mask and physical distancing inside the house and filed cases.

Comrade Vel Murugan, Coimbatore City Secretary, SCM of the party, former elected Councillor of Coimbatore Municipal Corporation and also a leader of slum dwellers movement in the city was foisted a false case for expressing solidarity with migrant labourers. He was arrested on 20th April, was remanded to judicial custody and put behind the bars while several accused were released from jails because Corona. He had to spend eight days in jail and was released from jail on 28th of April. Comrade Vel Murugan had been consistent fighter against the government's anti-poor smart

city project, privatisation of water supply, eviction of slums and various other issues of urban poor. Edappadi government arrested him for helping the migrant workers of ration and shelter and for working for poor and downtrodden who are affected by the abrupt Lockdown.

AISA – RYA activists Kaleeswaran, a law student and Tamilarasan, involved in film making, who are also from a slum in Madurai were taken into custody in the evening of 11th April for the fault of propagating 'Plate Banging' programme in solidarity with migrant workers through WhatsApp. They were illegally detained in the police station and were released only at midnight of 12 April after intervention from the party and advocates. The mobile phone seized from Tamilarasan has not been returned till date.

Comrade Govindaraj, party's Dharmapuri district secretary and one of the secretaries of state AICCTU and also an eosinophilic asthma patient was detained by police in the evening of 12 April for expressing solidarity with the cause of migrant workers. In the course of heated discussion with police who made derogatory remarks against communist movement, the police vindictively and forcibly admitted Comrade Govindaraj in Covid-19 dedicated hospital. Later, the doctor found him not to have any symptoms of Corona and after testing he was discharged from hospital on 13th April.

Comrade Sagayam is a leader of All India Port Workers Federation (AICCTU) branch of Tuticorin Port, party DLT member and also a consistent fighter against Sterlite. He also hails from one of the villages affected by Sterlite. He and other village leaders were framed in a false case because they objected to distribution of benefits



Workers in South Tamilnadu protest demanding rations by banging plates, 12 April

only to pro-Sterlite people without observing Lockdown norms of mask and physical distancing. But, the police refused to file counter case against the pro-Sterlite culprits. As police higher-ups too did not act on our representation, Comrade Sagayam led a protest of the entire village and finally the administration was forced to relent. □

FIR against CPIML Activist at the Behest of Sterlite in Tamilnadu

Vedanta's Sterlite copper plant closed due to people's protest for polluting the environment is trying to reopen in connivance with ruling AIADMK government.

When the company is distributing coronavirus relief materials among people of adjoining villages to the Sterlite factory without any government permission with an ulterior motive, democratic sections of the people including cadres of CPIML belong to pandarampatti village opposed the move. In the melee, police intervened and filed false cases on the protesting people including comrade Sahayam of CPIML, who is also the state executive committee member of AICCTU. He is the leader of the container lorry drivers Union of Tuticorin port.

Again on 22 May 2020, people in and around Tuticorin observed 2nd anniversary of police firing on protestors demanding closure of the plant in which 15 people lost their lives and became Martyrs of the anti-sterlite movement. At the initiative of Comrade.Sahayam, A meeting was called in pandarampatti, a dalit Hamlet of more than 1000 people and known for its role for the closure of Sterlite plant, by following lockdown norms to observe Martyrs day.

Even though, Martyrs day was observed in many places, state police cunningly targeted comrade Sahayam and another activist Santosh. They were booked with FIR under sections 269, 270, 271 and 188 of IPC read with Sec 4 of public place prevention of disfigurement act.

CPIML and AICCTU condemned the arbitrary police action and demanded withdrawal of false cases and appealed to the people to be vigilant against Sterlite copper plant's activities.

Covid 19 Lockdown Relief Work in Chandigarh

Kanwaljeet Singh

The sudden declaration of the lock down and the subsequent curfew left us all uncertain. The only certainty we could immediately imagine, was the hunger, hardship that the working people will have to face. Most of our work among the working class of Chandigarh is centred in the construction, contract and other unorganized segments. And with the abrupt lockdown in the last week of the month, all were bound to face the cash crunch, loss of salaries and work. Even without the Covid-19 crisis, this is a time when workers struggle to replenish stocks of food. Initially we contacted administrative officials to get volunteer passes. Soon we learnt that the administration does not need any volunteers, at least, from amongst us.

It was only the third day of the first phase of the lockdown, when I received the first distress call. This was a domestic worker. She narrated not her own woes but those of the whole mohalla she lives in, along with her two kids. "Comradeji we need to do something about it, lest we all die of hunger". So here was the task for us – we would have to collect rations and maintain our own distribution line as the scale of the lockdown suggested that the administration would do only enough to keep the desperation and anger of workers from boiling over.

Some friends who were earlier together in the anti CAA- NRC movement and a some from university and media suggested to raise a crowd fund and plan for a dry food relief campaign. We initially took part in the efforts made by a local NGO for the same. Soon our PEC Mess Workers

Union's crowd funding campaign caught some momentum, and by the time we pooled a little above one lakh, we had lists of the needy ready with phone numbers and addresses, thanks to the recent effort of our trade union comrades Com. Eisha, Com. Jeevaraj and Com. Satish, in centralising and digitising the membership data of construction worker's union. The dilemma was to decide who to prioritise, given that all are needy, whether we know them or not. We prioritised those who approached us over those whom we ourselves approached. A sizeable section of our own trade union members from construction workers, the rehri- farhi (street vendors) union and the kachchi colony Dhanas, a working class cluster, had informed us about their conditions and the apathy of the administration they were facing.

Finally on 17th April, we had CPIML UT Committee's first online meeting. We had two conditions to tackle, the immediate lockdown hunger and the surely following economic distress. While distributing ration kits we decided that we must simultaneously build pressure upon the administration to take up this task. Our hand, extended out for cooperation had already been rejected by the administration. They were clearly, keen, only, to work around with RSS and some BJP-connected NGOs and councillors.

Our efforts got an enthusiastic response from our local unit comrades especially in Dhanas, Hallomajra, Sector 2, Vikas Nagar, Maulijagran, Dadu Majra etc. Soon we realized that the crisis will not only last long, but also grow severe as we proceed into consecutive

stages of the lockdown. So, we organized nearly 600 families into a "Mahamari - Mahamandi Roko Committees" (Stop Pandemic and Economic Depression committees) to mainly over the WhatsApp groups, distributed over six clusters of our work area. So far, we have been able to use these groups only for the coordination and reporting and disseminating information, around the ration distribution task and to organize some of the recent central protest calls in the indoor conditions, but in future we hope to activate the same groups for organizing our tasks around the trade union issues arising out of lockdown conditions.

With only one curfew pass, with only one vehicle and two persons allowed to travel, it was a challenge to reach the people who sought help. So far, we have been able to reach more than 600 families and counting. More than Rs. 7 lakhs was collected thorough crowd funding as well as by other contacts have been spent. Though we still have a little above a lakh in reserve to meet future needs, as they arise. Though, now the pressure, summarily, has shifted over to the migrant workers travel related issues, but we energetically look forward to the struggling days ahead. Many professors, journalists, advocates from the civil society contributed to this campaign not only monetarily but by taking pains to lead and coordinate this campaign. Our party committee, and many of our youth and trade union activists like Narinder Sidhu, Punit, Gagan, Usman, Razia, Pragya, Sudama, Anuj Pandey, Agin, Lalbahadur, to name a few, took exceptional active roles on the ground. □

Distress Relief in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

Uday Kiran

Since the lockdown announced on 23rd March, the attitude of the state govts and authorities has been irresponsible. They left the workers to their misery and at the mercy of empathy of civil society. Comrades from Andhra and Telangana worked in coordination with the central platform run by AICCTU and CPIML comrades, to reach out to the distressed workers and to provide them with support.

A group has been formed locally with leading comrades and district secretaries from AP and Telangana. The combined and coordinated efforts of comrades helped to find the contacts within their reach and to talk to the workers and make arrangements for them accordingly. Initially, government officials of Telangana would be informed of the workers' needs through Twitter, and we would follow up with phone calls to Nodal officers and the government helpline numbers. As officials would often take too much time to attend and address the call, we tried other ways like taking help from voluntary organisations and individuals to reach out to stranded workers. We have also taken help of community kitchens formed

in some areas particularly to help the people who are stuck up by the lockdown. Most of the cases we dealt with were referred to us by the central helpline group and other comrades from different states like UP, Bengal, Orissa, Bihar and Jharkhand. We also got other calls are from intra-state migrant workers who moved to Hyderabad and other places from the agency areas of Visakhapatnam and East Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh.

More than 1200 workers from across the country stranded in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana were reached and helped during this phase. Construction workers are supposed to have identification cards issued by labour welfare boards in AP and Telangana. Other migrant workers have no registration or identification at all. Even those entitled to cards did not get much help through the labour welfare boards.

Party comrades have also taken up the responsibility and provided vegetables and ration in few villages of East Godavari district of AP. □

Relief Activists Attacked in Jadavpur, Kolkata

In the wake of the unplanned lockdown, as destitution and hunger began to spread, comrades in Kolkata undertook relief initiatives in all our areas of work. The local party committee of Jadavpur area played an exemplary role in this regard.

The party office of Gangulypukur emerged as the centre during this entire period, progressive citizens and our party sympathisers pooled their contributions in cash and kind and relief coupons were distributed among those in dire need of food and assistance.

The message of distributing relief materials spread far and wide. Apart from the adjoining 4-5 municipal wards, our comrades also extended their helping hand to Kashmiri hawkers and others who lost their livelihood, even in some pockets beyond Jadavpur. Till date materials worth more than Rs 2.2 lakh have been distributed among 2,300 people.

The local TMC councillor couldn't tolerate this relief work. As more and more people started coming to the party office, the TMC councillor pressurised us to conduct relief through the local police station. Our comrades resisted this pressure and the relief

campaign continued. On 12 May, a TMC goon assaulted Com. Babun Chatterjee, secretary of the party's Jadavpur Local Committee while he was on his way to party office.

Immediately, comrades assembled and went to the local PS, a FIR was filed on behalf of the district party committee, and a diary was made by the victim. Police was hesitant to take steps, and on the morrow, a militant protest demonstration was organised in front of the police station, defying lockdown norms. A delegation of other left parties also submitted a memorandum demanding arrest of the culprit. The Officer Incharge promised to take steps within three days. Comrades in other parts of Kolkata as well as Greater Kolkata region, organised prompt protests. Due to pressure from different quarters, police was forced to act, warned the culprit and extended necessary protection and cooperation to our party to carry on the relief work. It needs to be mentioned that the relief campaign and the protests have found considerable support among the common people in the area. □

Thousands of Distressed Workers in Jaipur Come Out on the Streets

Rahul Chaudhary

Thousands of distressed and hungry migrant workers, desperate to go home after they had lost their jobs in the city and receiving no help from the administration and government, came out on the streets on 11 May 2020 in Jaipur at Nahri ka Naka in the Shastri Nagar Thana area to express their anger.

Instead of confronting such a large numbers of migrants with sympathy, the police and RAC used force against them, women, and children causing a stampede which resulted in many getting injured.

As soon as the affected workers gave information about this incident on the Samarth Helpline, responsible people from three Left parties associated with the Helpline arrived on the spot, including CPI leader Nisha Siddhu, CPM Jaipur District Secretary Sumitra Chopra, CPIML District Secretary Rahul Chaudhary, CITU leaders Harendra Singh and Vijay Singh. Other social activists and journalists also reached


the spot. They heard the problems of the workers and tried to help them by talking to the administration.

These workers are all migrant workers from Bihar and West Bengal and are about 8,000 in number in this tiny colony. These workers have been given rations just once during this entire period by the administration. It is over one month since they got rations. So most of the food and rations were being provided through this helpline and some social organizations; but even this was not sufficient. Distressed, these workers tried hard to go home; they even paid a lot of money to local authorized computer vendors (e-mitra) in the name of registration for the booking of rail tickets, but no means of going home was arranged for them. Eventually the desperate come out on the streets.

They have also called out for help to their Chief Ministers to get them home, but in view of the callousness of the administration it does not appear as if they will be

given any help. Local goons often trouble them and beat them up.

Rahul Chaudhary, a CPIML activists associated with the helpline, said that for many days we have been trying to arrange some transport for these workers to get home. But so far the administration has made no arrangement for them. Thousands of workers have been herded together in this small area in inhuman conditions. So many people living in such close proximity is an open invitation to the pandemic, but the administration remains heedless.

Police Mitra used in Lathi Charge: Video footages of the 11 May incident show local 'Police Mitra's (citizen volunteers meant to help police in range of civilian activities) wielding lathis on the workers and ill-treating and abusing them. This is a flagrant violation of the country's law and order system, said these activists and demanded that cognizance should be taken immediately. 



Migrant workers at Nahri Ka Naka, Jaipur

Kashmiri Workers Sent Home from Coimbatore

Around 129 Kashmiri workers including Altaf, Azad, Tinku and Pradeep employed in Mahalakshmi Logistics at Somanur in Coimbatore could be sent to their homes at Basoli in Kathua District by the efforts of activists who managed their train journey after coming to know of their plight through a working class portal THOZHILALAR KOODAM published from Chennai.



Relief Work During Lockdown in Delhi

Sucheta De

The massive informalisation of labour force and the forced migration of the poor from rural areas to urban centres that has been going on since last few decades have resulted in horrific humanitarian crisis as is evident from the impoverished situation of working masses, especially migrant workers in India's cities.

Delhi, the National Capital is one such city that is witnessing the destitution of workers in lockdown. Declaration of the lockdown meant snatching away of livelihood and wages for lakhs of migrant workers who run the economy of the city. Within three days of the declaration of the lockdown, thousands of migrant workers gathered at Anand Vihar Interstate Bus Terminus in desperate attempt to go back to where they came from, because the government no more cares about them.

In all of the working class areas of Delhi lockdown came with hunger. Although the Delhi Government has been claiming that it will ensure no one sleeps hungry in the state, the

reality is quite in contrast.

Initially, the Delhi Government arranged for food only in few night shelters set up for lockdown. It took an unmanageable situation at the night shelters and pressure from Trade Unions and civil society that they started half-hearted attempts of serving food at some schools and public offices. Even this mechanism is extremely ineffective to address the magnitude of the problem as it is impossible for workers from slums to walk to distant places from their slums. In the name of enforcing lockdown the Police has been aggressively attacking and intimidating workers who are trying to go to get food.

AICCTU and CPIML comrades started getting distress calls from workers as soon as the lockdown was announced. In a coordinated manner, we are raising our demands with the Delhi Govt, local MLA and district level authorities. We are also collecting relief from supporters and distributing among workers.

We are submitting the details

of stranded workers in the portal of Delhi Govt meant for providing food, ration and monetary relief. It is only after our concerted effort that distribution of food at the slum itself has started in some areas.

Most of migrant workers do not have Delhi's ration card and thus were excluded from ration provided by Delhi govt. It was only after making noise for several days that the Delhi govt provided a link for applying for temporary ration card. For most of the time the server of the link does not work. And it is nearly impossible for the workers to complete the complex procedure. We demanded that this requirement is done away with and door step delivery of ration is provided for workers without any criterion.

The Delhi Govt declared that Rs 5000 will be given to construction workers who have registration with the welfare board. This provision again is meaningless for the lakhs of migrant workers who do not have any registration with the board. We have submitted details of around 2500 workers to the Delhi Govt. We demand that all the workers are provided with monetary relief without exclusionary criterion of registration with the board.

AICCTU and CPIML have run relief drive by giving ration to workers in nearly twenty different localities. We have also sought help from civil society organizations in areas where we could not deliver ration.

The AICCTU has also been receiving calls from workers who are being retrenched by their employers amidst lockdown. The AICCTU has successfully stopped retrenchment in some instances and our struggle in others are continuing. ■



AICCTU cadres serving food and water to the migrants departing to home state by buses during Lockdown4, in Delhi

Invisible but Irreplaceable?

Migrant Labour BC 2019 and AC 2020

Ajit Patil

Migrant labour, displaced from the land and the rural economy in the 40 years BC (Before Corona) by the neoliberal agenda pushed by the ruling classes, had remained both invisible and irreplaceable till now.

With the Covid-19 lockdown, this huge segment of humanity seemed to suddenly walk out on to the stage. Images of the seemingly endless flow of workers desperate to “go home” to their villages forced themselves into public consciousness. This exodus is the largest displacement of people in post-Independence India.

What the visibility of this disenfranchised section of the working class has generated in liberal public opinion is compassion. This compassion, has of course been conspicuously lacking in most state institutions, including the judiciary. But compassion, while better than apathy and cruelty, is not solidarity. Solidarity demands that we recognise that the lockdown marks an intensification, not a disruption of the systemic injustice and inequity to which these workers are subjected. Even in “normal” times, these workers have been carrying out the most degrading, dangerous, unskilled, laborious jobs in the organized, unorganized and service industries - working 12 hour shifts even before the government sought to formally legalise such working hours and conditions.

Someone has described the workers’ “Walking Away” from the work ghettos of the metros and cities where they had worked

silently and invisibly till now, as a Civil Disobedience Movement of sorts. They have defied the rules, the laws, the coercive machinery of the state and the persuasions and force of the ruling classes. The mere possibility of their disappearance from the cheap, utterly exploitative, profit driven systems has caused a measure of uneasiness in the ruling classes. The workers have paid the price of this disobedience with sweat, blood, and life. The ‘compassionate’ response neglects the innate anger, frustration, rebellion and the quest for recognition of their contribution to the society - all rolled in to one in this act of defiance by migrant labourers. Migrant workers are estimated by the Government now at 4 crores (a week before at 8 crores) and by observers at a more realistic 14 crores; no reliable data is available about the exact numbers in spite of the existence of the Migratory Labour Act which mandates such enrollment. Now with the planned withdrawal of the provisions of this law even this fig leaf will vanish for the naked kings.

Circa 2020 AC (After Corona)

Forced migration used to be an inherent feature of barbarism, slavery and feudalism. But the advent of colonialism by the European and other empires led to an unprecedented rise in forced migration (indentured labour). Africa, Ireland, Asia – in particular India - were victims of this colonial exploitation. Under the British,

French and the Portuguese, Indian indentured labour went the world over from UP, Bihar, Tamilnadu, Goa and other parts of India. The first interstate migrants on a large scale was probably from Bihar, Jharkhand and Bengal to the Tea Gardens of Assam under the East India Company. The Intra state migration from the feudal rural hinterlands was the foundation on which cities across India were built.

With this rather restricted introduction I move ahead with some observations in the crossover time. This note is a product of firsthand experience of dealing with the humanitarian side of the migrant crisis as a member of the help group of AICCTU, which triggered some thinking, reading and observing, as well as some interactions with comrades and others.

I sincerely feel that we must initiate a study of the migration and migrant labour on a pan India basis with active collaborations of comrades from both the states of residence and states of work. A Marxist-Leninist analysis of a mass constituting 40 percent of India’s working population is long overdue.

1. The migration of labour and other classes started with the advent of establishment of industry, ports, urban centers well connected by railways during the colonial rule. And the migration was both interstate and intra state. In Mumbai it was from different provinces as well as from Konkan and western Maharashtra. Likewise in Kolkata it was from Bihar, Jharkhand,

Orissa and East Bengal. This process was triggered by unequal development, and feudal and social exploitation. Migrant labour was mainly men. But sex workers in all major cities were both inter and intra state migrants – driven by poverty, drought and feudal customs.

2. After independence, in the phase of development of capitalism, in the absence of the real land reforms taking place especially in the northern half of the country, the trend continued. The transgender community was added to the list of migrants in greater numbers. Recurrent droughts in various states, pauperization of the landless, agricultural labour, artisans in the villages, marginal farmers and concentration of large tracts of land in the hands of the few with ever diminishing size of land in the hands of majority due to sale and mutation continued to swell the ranks of migrants to the cities, of whom Dalits and Muslims being socially disadvantaged formed a major section. All of them were forced into densely populated, dehumanizing slum colonies. Dharavi, the biggest slum in Asia, has a density of 4-5 lakh people per acre if not more. 50 % percent of Mumbai's population was living in slums occupying only 6 percent land area 10 years back and the aim of the builder-bureaucrat-politician lobby is to reduce the area to 5 % post new DC rules 2034. Thus the 'social distancing' was created in BC 2019 with no space for physical distancing in AC 2020! The model of capitalism encouraged interstate and intra state migration to create a reserve army of labour for Industry.

Due to the unevenness of the capitalist development amongst the states, migration of labour from less developed to the more developed states continued to rise, in spite of regional chauvinist politics rearing its head against the migrants. The migrants from UP, Bihar, Rajasthan and Orissa were the first to migrate and settle down with families in many cases. Migration of rural labour also began from the weaker agricultural states to the grain and sugar bowls of the country.

3. But the floodgates opened after the 1991 onslaught of neo liberal policies and the slow devastation of the agricultural economy. The grabbing of natural resources in terms of Jal and Jangal in addition to land added the Adivasis to the ranks of migrants.

4. The typical work carried out by the migrants is : Construction of all sorts including Highways/ Infrastructure, Powerloom, Readymade garments, Jari Industry, Carpenters, Taxi and Auto drivers, Domestic work, Daily wage work in construction and house repair, Aluminum window, plumbing , electrical work, painting work, housekeeping in the service industry, contract Safai (cleaning) work, vegetable and thela vending, all type of contract labour, watchmen and security guards in restaurants, eateries and hotels, Cinema industry work, workers in retail shops, malls, AC and Fridge repairs, Pest control, Mathadis (One who lift and shift loads with Matha – i.e manually), barbers, tiling workers, sugar cane cutting workers from Beed working in the sugar belts of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra and

Telangana, Ornament workers, gold and silver refinery workers, Agricultural labour in Punjab and Kerala from northern states, Sex workers, entertainment industry workers, call center workers.... The list is endless. The skill sets differ and so do the income levels creating strata amongst them.

Some statistics say it all:

- It is estimated that Kerala has around 2.5 million to 3 million migrant workers.
- "In Mumbai alone 90,000 people mainly from Bihar, UP and Jharkhand were working as drivers in companies and have since left for their state," according to SME chamber of commerce founder Chairperson.
- While an exact estimate of the numbers is not documented, labour unions say around 3 lakh people have left Pune district alone. The majority of them were employed on contract in SMEs that act as vendors and sub-vendors to bigger units. These units Pune, Pimpri-Chinchwad, Talegaon and Chakan industrial belts and automobile hubs are at present unable to restart operations as their labour have left.
- Chandrakant Salunkhe, founder president of the SME Chamber of India, estimated that migrant workers formed 40% of the 78 lakh workforce in the 14 lakh registered SMEs in the state. Around 80% of the workers were semi-skilled.
- While authentic data about contractual labour in Maharashtra is not readily available, estimates say they constitute around 30-40% of the total workforce, with migrant labourers forming more than 90% of them.
- One of the reasons why the industry has preferred to employ

migrant labour in blue-collar jobs has been because of their flexibility Dilip Pawar, working president of Shramik Ekta Mahasangh a federation of unions in Pune and ex. Bajaj Auto worker-leader, said companies manage to employ migrants by paying them much less than prevalent market rates. "The cost of hiring migrants is generally lower as they come alone, stay in shared accommodation and are ready to work extended hours for less pay. This might not be possible with local people," he said.

- Pawar, for his part, strongly pushes for zone-wise fixation of minimum payment, which will ensure workers stick with companies. "For a zone like Pune, the minimum payment should be around Rs 25,000 per month which would allow the worker to have two square meals a day," Pawar said. The government's move to attract local youth would work only if the payment is lucrative, he said.

5. Our experience was mainly with migrant workers from Jharkhand with some cases from UP, Bengal and Bihar. UP and Bihar migrant labourers had a better support system and were more resourceful, better connected. The workers from Jharkhand were mainly Jari, Garment workers and Daily wage earners. Most of them can be termed as unskilled. They worked in small industries set up by small owners from their own villages or nearby. Some had families, with most of them staying in groups inside the workshops. As late entrants in the labour market they were relegated to the lowly skilled and hence lowly paid jobs. Those who sought our help hailed from Dharavi, Antop Hill and Wadala's

sprawling slums. The majority of them were Muslims, Adivasis and OBCs. In the Muslims many were Ansaris. When I asked out of curiosity I was told that they are what in Maharashtra are called Dalit Muslims.

6. During the first days of the overwhelming demand for groceries, we resorted to charitable distribution. But the realization of absolute paucity of resources in terms of money, material and persons in the face of the huge crisis we felt a need to remind the state that it must take responsibility for the forced, unplanned clampdown. So we set up a databased system to share with and then demand dry rations from the government as a right. It worked well till the rice available with the state government from their central share lasted.

7. The migrant workers who have returned back or intend to do so in near future may not return back to the industrially developed states. Their continued stay back in already crumbling agrarian economy is likely to exacerbate the already deep social and economic contradictions. The communal fascist regime wishes to use the surplus labour available in this way cheaply for corporatization of the agriculture and putting up agrobased industries in the states from where the migrants hail. There are reasons to believe that the jobs in the industry and service industry will not be available in the formal and informal sectors in the near future. The construction industry is likely to suffer a severe blow. The recession in some sectors of Indian economy in BC 2019 shows signs of moving to an all engulfing depression in 2020 AC. The corporates are going to

attack taking advantage of the situation AC 2020 to pass on the entire burden by bringing in Job losses, salary cuts, increased exploitation by extended hours working in both formal and informal sectors of Industry and service industry. They also have a dream of using increased automation, digitalization, work from home to usher in the Industrial Revolution #4. Besides the migrants, the contractual workers have already started reeling under the onslaught on jobs. They are being asked to take as high as 50% salary cuts to retain the jobs they have been holding for a number of years. Thus the contradiction between the capital in general and Fin Tech capital in particular with the informal sector of the industry, workers in the formal sector post corporatization of the public sector, migrant labour and contract labour is sharpening every passing day. The Communal Fascist- Corporate nexus will try to use this situation to create fissures in our core base. We must guard against this by organizing the returnees with demand for work, politically and socially.

8. It is also essential to work amongst the migrant and contract workers left behind in the industrially advanced states. (We noted that almost all the workers were using smart phones and were WhatsApp savvy). We must also reach out to all those categories mentioned in point #4 and organize them. They are the most vulnerable and distressed sections in the developing situation A C 2020. It is heartening to note that the trade unions who were lukewarm in their response to the migrant crisis in the beginning have rallied behind and have lately

taken cognizance of the need to organize this section of labour without which the organized labour cannot counter the onslaught of the capital.

Says Com Vishwas Utagi, Co-Convener of the Trade Union Joint Action Committee:

- All types of migrant workers must be registered mandatorily by respective state government's labour departments
- They must be brought under the definition of worker under ID ACT or Contract Act to provide them legal cover.
- Trade unions must organise them both at work and out of work.

Today they are the worst affected - without ration card and without any source of income as economy is sinking.

9. It is very important to underline the role of the women in the struggle of migrants. They suffer if migrants are away from home. If they accompany them the women work as domestic workers as well as work at their own homes. Many domestic workers are migrants themselves. The women have to bear the consequences of restricted spaces and public utilities, lumpenization in the slums, addiction issues of menfolk and sexual harassment.

Their health gets the last priority. A large number of women from slums also work in service industry with long hours being a rule. Organizing various sections of working women by developing contacts at their areas of living needs to be looked at and new, innovative and all-encompassing methods around their existence evolved by our comrades. Wherever possible we need to organize the sex workers as well as transgender persons. Some beginnings are noted in Maharashtra in both these sections by some left leaning groups. □

Karnataka

Notes on Migrant Workers Assistance Campaign

Maithreyi Krishnan and Clifton d'Rozario

Covid-19 hit India at a time when a fascist government is implementing its project of converting this nation from a constitutional democracy to a fascist state, even as the economic crisis deepens and unemployment is rising. Since its re-election in May 2019, this RSS/BJP government has set about to implement its fascist agenda of establishing a Hindu Rashtra seen in its brazen actions around the abrogation of Article 370 and the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act and the declaration of National People's Register and National Citizens Register. Indeed, the country had risen to the challenge and mounted a spirited resistance to this agenda at which time

Covid-19 struck and a lockdown was declared with 4 hours notice.

Covid-19 has given rise to two concurrent crises – the health crisis, and the livelihood crisis that was a direct consequence of Modi's unplanned lockdown. In fact the lockdown has exposed the precariousness of the existence of 90% of India's population whose livelihoods are earned in the informal sector. As the ILO notes, *'In India, Nigeria and Brazil, the number of workers in the informal economy affected by the lockdown and other containment measures is substantial. In India with a share of almost 90 per cent of people working in the informal economy about 400 million workers in the informal*

economy are at risk of falling deeper into poverty during the crisis'^a The lives of workers in the informal sector have always been precarious, with no application of labour laws, no medical benefits and no job security. It is this mode of precarious livelihood which has been hit most seriously by the lockdown. The Modi government did not bother about the migrant and daily wage workers who live a hand-to-mouth existence. As one of the daily wage workers put it poignantly, *'if we don't work we don't eat'*. Apart from the daily wagers, those who earn by piece work or those who earn monthly

[a] ILO Monitor 2nd Edition: COVID-19 and the world of work, https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/docu-ments/briefingnote/wcms_740877.pdf

but at subsistence levels, were also likely to be gravely affected. Further, the informal economy which consists of those who make a living at the very fringes of the economy be it beggars, sex workers, rag pickers etc were also not in the contemplation of the government. Their livelihood depends on the fact that there is economic activity and the absence of economic activity, means that they too are without a means of subsistence.

Jan Bremen in his useful classification of the labour economy describes four types of workers. The labour elite, the petit bourgeoisie, the sub-proletariat, and the paupers or the lumpen proletariat.

- The labour elite is defined by regular employment in the public sector or in private enterprises and whose working conditions are protected by trade unions and legitimized by law.
- The lumpen proletariat is engaged in heavy work but has low prestige. These workers receive irregular and low wages and their work is not bound to a fixed place or time.
- The petty bourgeoisie - works in small enterprises are self-employed and sometimes own one-person firms. They may also engage in economic brokerage, act as money lenders and labour recruiters.
- The sub-proletariat – This forms the largest group in the urban labour force. It includes not only the casual and unskilled labourers but also those who are employed by small-scale enterprises.... The lack of dignity and stigma that they face makes them feel powerless.^b

It is clear from the repeated

[b] Jan Bremen, Jan Bremen Omnibus, p.7.

invocations of the Prime Minister that in the imagination of the government, the only constituency the government addressed was the labour elite. When the Prime Minister referenced working at home, it is a privilege which only some sections of the labour elite could do. As one went lower down the labour hierarchy it became increasingly impossible to do. It was not possible for the petty bourgeoisie such as the owner of the small enterprises which remained shut under lockdown. Neither was it possible for those doing the hard labour of lifting in construction work and part of the lumpen proletariat. It was also not possible for those working in the garment sector and part of the sub-proletariat.

In other words, the decision of lockdown was taken, addressing how some section of the labour elite could continue to work, while ignoring the needs of 90 percent of the Indian working population.

One of the sections of the working class decimated by this autocratic imposition of lockdown is the migrant workers. The lockdown was characterised by the failure to ensure to the workers the most basic necessities of even food. The first indication that this was not considered was the images of migrant labour in thousands in bus stands and railway stations, desperate to get back. The poignant images of thousands of migrants walking sometimes literally hundreds of kilometers to get home, brought home the fact that the migrant worker did not figure in the decision to impose and implement the lockdown. Their exodus from the towns and cities and march on foot to their villages, with their families and children, was the largest since partition.

Sadly, it must be said, that it

took the Coronavirus pandemic to bring to the fore the social reality of migrant labour, those oppressed sections of rural India travelling to all parts of the country in search of survival wages. Suddenly, the lakhs of people who migrate from UP, Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, West Bengal, Assam, Tripura, Manipur, Orissa to the big cities and even rural areas of other States became visible. Their inhuman living conditions in workers' colonies on construction and large infrastructure project sites were open for all to see. Just as an illustration, in Bengaluru more than 6000 migrant workers from Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh and other states are employed in the construction of the Kempegowda International Airport expansion project. 40% of the 1.4 lakh workforce employed in 7000 licenced hotels, as is 45% of the 80,000 strong security guard workforce besides more than 10,000 migrant workers are employed in the construction of Metro. In last count more than 5 lakh migrant workers have registered themselves on the Karnataka Government online portal seeking to return home.

Response of the Government: Contempt for the workers while pushing their communal agenda

However, despite the very grave nature of the problem, the Modi Government was unconcerned with the existential crisis that the migrant workers were facing. The resistance of the migrant workers in the form of the first wave of exodus compelled the Modi Government to issue a notification

on 29.03.2020 seeking to address the migrant worker issue by mandating that states should take care of the food and shelter needs of migrant workers in the place where they are stranded and also made it clear that employers should pay the migrant workers their due wages without any deductions and that house owners should not demand rent and workers should not be evicted from rented premises during the lockdown. Despite such order, the apathy was striking in its failure to take any step to enforce the same. The true face of the Modi government is revealed in its notification on 19.04.20 laying down the "Standard Operating System (SOP) for movement of Stranded Labour", not paying heed to the voices of migrant workers to return home, instead coming up with a scheme for the stranded workers to be employed in permitted activities of 'manufacturing, construction, farming and MGNREGA within the state in which they are stranded'. If the voices of migrant labour are articulating their need to go back home, the Central Government through its notifications has demonstrated that for it, migrant labour are not persons entitled to rights under the Constitution but rather labouring bodies who can be sent to perform labour at other sites regardless of what they want. The right to autonomy and the right to dignity of the migrant workers has no meaning for this government.

Instead, unable to counter the pandemic or the food, job and financial insecurity of people, RSS and BJP busied themselves with their hate-filled disinformation campaign blaming China and the Muslim community for the coronavirus epidemic and misleading the people by spreading

fake news, superstitious beliefs and obscurantist ideas. A deliberate effort was made to selectively criminalise and communalise an international religious gathering of the Tableeghi Jamaat in Delhi though there were numerous other political and religious gatherings at the same time and even after that. Wild and baseless allegation targeted the entire community as 'corona criminals' propagating a 'corona jihad', and the blame for the entire pandemic was laid at the doorstep of the Muslim community. In fact, post a funeral in ISKCON UK confirmed 21 COVID positive cases in their London congregation, and that five have died. Apparently virus spread when about 1,000 people gathered at a 12th March funeral of a devotee. However, rightly this was not communalized. Instead, the Union Government chose to use the period of the lockdown to further target and isolate members of the Muslim community, including instances of social and economic boycott. In Bangalore, we witnessed such a targeting of persons from Bihar after a worker from Bihar was tested positive for COVID-19, where the media spoke of "Bihari-origin corona bomber" and targeted persons from Bihar.

We have encountered this hatred also in the migrant workers who were in touch with us for rations and to go back to their homes. We met thousands of migrant workers from Gorakhpur, UP, who initially took pride in Yogi and Modi. However, as days passed and the sense of abandonment dawned on workers, especially given that they had to struggle to get rations from the State as also to get a train ticket back home, we could see a change in their views. Several workers who had Yogi and Modi as the profile picture

on whatsapp actually removed it and participated in the poster and "*bus haemin ghar jaana hain*" campaigns, whose central slogan was "*Thalli bi baja di, diya bi jala di, bahut ho gaya tamasha, bus hamein ghar jaana hain*".

Response of CPIML and AICCTU

With the imposition of the lockdown, CPIML immediately set up a system to stand with the migrant workers stranded in various States. Com. Vinod Singh, MLA, Bagodar, Jharkhand put out a public call to migrant workers stranded across the country to contact him. In the three weeks of the lockdown, this helpline was dealing with distress calls of atleast 1000 migrant workers daily. Their numbers were forwarded to Party and AICCTU comrades in different states or other political activists in other states and cities who were engaged in relief work.

In Karnataka too, CPI(ML) and AICCTU responded to over 10,000 workers who reached out. While on one side there was an effort to ensure the provision of food/ration kits, on the other side, CPI(ML) and AICCTU launched a campaign to ensure that the government took the responsibility to ensure the provision of the basic necessity of food to all migrant workers. This campaign included a hunger fast and protest on 19th April seeking that the steps take immediate steps to protect the lives of migrant workers to live with dignity. A sustained campaign by various organizations finally resulted in the State Government agreeing to provide ration kits to migrant workers while the "*Bas, hame ghar jaana hain*" campaign ensured that trains were resumed for migrant workers.

From distributing relief amongst the workers to ensuring workers reach their homes, the AICCTU has been actively working with migrant workers across the State, along with several civil society organisations. Our approach was to build a political narrative with migrant workers in the focus to show the harsh impacts of the unplanned lockdown that has been imposed on the residents of this country.

The fight to return home: Workers asserting their rights to decide their lives

We have seen two waves of the fight of the migrant workers to return home. The first wave was immediately on the announcement of the lockdown on 24th March and continued throughout the lockdown period. After all protests Modi government was forced to allow migrant workers to travel back to their States.

What does it take for a person to decide to walk to their homes, knowing that it is hundreds and even few thousand kilometres away

- without knowing the language or having social networks; Without money in their hands, no food, unaware of the route to be taken, and oblivious of what lies around the corner, at the hands of the police or the authorities. The horror stories of what these migrant workers on the roads have had to endure is sufficient to shock any reasonable person's conscience and torture some souls. However, the same did not move the government who while "permitting workers" to travel took no steps to ensure a dignified manner of return to the workers, even in the second wave when workers decided to return home in May.

In fact, the Karnataka Government took a decision not to run trains to take migrant workers back to their states on the dictates of the builder lobby. The AICCTU filed an application before the High Court seeking for free and safe transportation for workers. A sustained campaign organized by various organizations including AICCTU, "*Bas, hame ghar jaana hain*", compelled the State Government to reverse this decision. The consequence though

of this episode was the complete erosion of trust in the government and a common knowledge of its lack of commitment in respecting the decision and right of the migrant workers to return to their homes. This coupled with the arbitrariness in allocation of train tickets, lack of knowledge of trains, undignified treatment of workers at police stations where they are compelled to go to submit return application forms, low number of trains running, among other issues have only confirmed their suspicions that they are being held back in the state against their wishes and solely to compel them to return to work.

It is in this context that there is a second wave of migrant workers taking to the streets and in it lies the key to understanding their decision. The workers are articulating a feeling of being trapped. But, the migrant workers are unwilling to being held captive, against their wishes, and become helpless. They are asserting their right to decide their lives, their autonomy and are resolved to salvaging their dignity from the State's concerted assault on it. ■

We shall fight! We shall win!

The young women workers of KPR Textiles from Nabrangpur district are finally boarding a train to Odisha at 11pm. But not without a fight! This was achieved at the end of a hectic day of calls and coordination from Chennai and Bhubaneswar. In fact the negotiations became tense since yesterday morning. Kudos to the AICCTU Coimbatore team that has been pushing the Coimbatore administration nonstop and the AICCTU President V Shankar who guided us well. The atmosphere in the company had become tense this morning as they picked 19 workers and put them on a bus. The HR made sure that the two or three women who were organising the entire exercise are pushed out of the company first. These women were verbally intimidated too. Following

this all workers were angry and emotionally upset. Constant pressure from BBSR and AICCTU resulted in the Coimbatore administration having to accept the entire list and not send in batches. Those who were put on the bus were called back. Also, senior govt officers in Bhubaneswar helped ensure the women travel together and that too by train as we wanted. They conveyed this to us by 2pm. The group of 89 women will get down at Ganjam station. The Collector Nabrangpur has been informed. He and the Ganjam Collector will make transport arrangements to Nabrangpur from there. The women say they do not mind 28 days of quarantine as long as they reach Nabrangpur!

- Ranjana.

(Ranjana is a progressive activist from Odisha who played a key role in securing young tribal women workers return to their home from Coimbatore.)

The Pandemic and Beyond

Free Quality Healthcare is a Fundamental Right

Arindam Sen

When the whole of India was put under lock and key in late March, we had only 564 known cases of Novel Coronavirus infection. By the middle of May, we earned the dubious distinction of defeating eternal competitor China (which had nearly 83000 cases) at least in this field. On May 19 the tally crossed the 100000 mark and is all set to rise rapidly for quite some time.

Clearly, it has been a callously planned, brutally and chaotically executed lockdown with an extremely poor cost-benefit ratio. But then there are a good many instances - - our very own Kerala being one of them - - where lockdowns, carefully designed in keeping with actual conditions on the ground and executed in combination with vigorous contact tracing and testing on the one hand and on the other, the state supplying the people under lockdown with all necessary provisions and services, have proved quite useful. So the question is not whether lockdown per se, lockdown in the abstract, is good or bad. It all depends on how a nation plans and executes its overall strategy (of which lockdown may or may not be one of several component parts) of combating an epidemic or pandemic in correspondence with its specific socio-economic conditions. But this is about the urgent or immediate task. Closely connected with this is the broader and long-term agenda of developing a national healthcare policy and infrastructure that should have at its core not the logic of capital accumulation but the interests of the aam aadmi, aim at free healthcare for all, and strive to prevent or at least minimize the impacts of epidemics/pandemics. We propose to discuss the two-point agenda in two parts.

Part I

Coping With Epidemics And Pandemics

Human society has encountered series of epidemics and, with the exponential growth of international commerce under capitalism, also pandemics. The dreaded "Black Death", for example, peaked in Europe between 1347 and 1351 and killed anywhere between 75 to 200 million people. Even Cholera, a disease so familiar to older people in India, spread across much of the globe seven times over the past two centuries, the one that raged between 1960s and early 1970s being the last one. Nearly a hundred years ago we had the so-called Spanish flu, followed by others like HIV (which, since 1981, has claimed the lives of more than 32 million people and at the end of 2018 around 37.9 million people were living with it), SARS (which, like Covid-19, was due to a Coronavirus known as SARS-

CoV and infected an estimated 8,000 people in 29 countries in the year 2002), H1N1 or the Swine Flu (which infected an estimated 60.8 million people in 2009 - 2010, with 12,469 fatalities, of which about 80% were people younger than 65 years). A quick glance at a couple of these outbreaks, we believe, can help us in our collective fight against the scourge at hand. For although everything has changed over the decades, it is equally true that the more things change, the more they stay the same.

How the Colonial Rulers Dealt With the 1896 Plague In India

The bubonic plague of 1896 travelled from its epicenter in Yunnan, China, via Hong Kong to Bombay port. The vehicle of contagion was imported merchandise, which were often crammed with infected rodents. From Bombay the disease spread to some other areas including Punjab, the United Provinces,

Bengal and even Burma. To make matters worse, the plague was accompanied by a famine that started from Bundelkhand and spread to other areas. By 1901 four lac Indians fell pray to it and by 1905 the toll was 10 lac.

According to some scholars, initially the British government preferred to remain passive because they did not want to disturb the flourishing international trade, particularly the opium trade with China. But when some of their trade partners got wind of the plague and threatened restricting trade with India, the government was forced to act.

In January 1897, Sir John Woodburn moved a very brief and hurriedly drafted bill to arm the authorities with arbitrary powers to check the spread of the disease. The basic motive was to protect British mercantile interests. As Mr. Woodburn said while introducing the bill, "foreign countries are already much alarmed at the possibility of infection from India... (and therefore) for the safeguarding

of our commerce the government must be prepared to take steps to allay the fears of other nations."

The bill was enacted as "The Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897" and put into practice with brute force. Aggressive screening of passengers at railway stations and ports and forced isolation of those suspected of having been infected; house to house searches for sick persons by police and in some cases military personnel, who often ordered men and women to strip in public so that they could be checked for symptoms of plague on armpits and groins; chemically disinfecting not only houses but even human beings suspected of having the disease; fumigating and even burning down houses as well as clothes and other belongings of the people in what we call "hot spots" - repressive acts like these generated a lot of animosity among the masses, particularly in Bombay city and Puna (as they were called in those days). The people's disaffection found voice in mass protests, including an attack on a hospital that was virtually a prison for plague patients, and also in articles written by Bal Gangadhar Tilak in his Marathi paper Kesari.

Shortly afterwards, the Chapekar brothers from Puna shot dead the

Bombay municipal commissioner WC Rand, who was leading a repressive campaign in the name of plague control, and his military escort. The government took this opportunity to frame several of its opponents on charges of sedition, i.e., instigating or assisting the murder. Foremost among them was Tilak, who was charged for sedition at the Bombay High Court. Justice Arthur Strachey in his charge to the Jury came up with a biased and distorted interpretation of sedition. He said that one was free to criticize the government, but if a journalist made his readers hate the government, that would amount to sedition. He further added that an article "published at a time of profound peace, prosperity and contentment" could be ignored, but not one which was written "at a time of agitation and unrest", when "ignorant people" would "become indisposed to obey and support the government"; in the latter case it would certainly amount to sedition. The Jury (most of them Europeans) found Tilak guilty and he was sentenced to eighteen months in prison. About a month later, the Chapekar brothers were caught and summarily sentenced to death.

In sum, the colonial government, guided by its own interests,

delayed taking action and then sought to tackle the situation with inhuman repressive measures, as if it was a law and order problem. Instead of trying to de-rat imported merchandise, houses and streets, it tried to chemically disinfect or even burn down whatever they assumed to be contaminated. The municipal authorities never took the 'natives' into confidence and imposed arbitrary restrictions on their movements without prior announcement, even as white and brown 'sahibs' were free to move around. In mortal fear of both the disease and the 'treatment', general people in their thousands fled from cities to their villages, unwittingly helping spread the disease. Whatever the authorities did, however, was done with legal sanction provided by the Act of 1897.

Today it is the same Act that the government of the day has taken up as its main instrument of repression and has also got it amended through an ordinance so as to render the old Act even more barbaric. Following in the footsteps of their colonial forefathers, the fascist rulers are now using the present period of health-cum-humanitarian crisis to frame their foremost critics and political



(L) 1896 - Disinfecting sufferers of the plague in wooden tubs in Karachi.
(R) 2020 - Administration 'cleaned' Migrants at Bareilly with disinfectant.

opponents on false charges. And in most cases even the apex court, like the Bombay High Court in 1897, is taking a biased and authoritarian stance in favour of the government, failing to protect the constitutionally guaranteed democratic rights of activists and intellectuals.

But there was another dimension - a popular-democratic heritage - of the struggle against plague. A good many social/religious organisations and individuals, such as Vivekananda and his followers, participated vigorously in plague and famine relief work at great risk to their own lives. And today also we see ordinary people coming forward to help their fellow citizens in all possible ways, even as left activists brave lockdown conditions to combine relief work with agitations to force the authorities do the needful for people in distress.

1918: The Pandemic that Taught Governments to be More Responsible

The so-called Spanish flu spread across the world in three waves (early 1918, late August and early 1919) and claimed at least 50 million lives. Among all countries, the highest toll was in India with 14 to 18 million deaths. As in 1896, Bombay was the gateway of India for the deadly virus, the main vehicle on this occasion being ships carrying troops from war fronts in Europe. From Bombay the men went back to their home States, carrying the disease with them. This time too, a failed monsoon and famine-like conditions in parts of the country left people hungry, weak and more susceptible to disease.

Like typhus and cholera, flu was considered one of the "crowd diseases", i.e., diseases which

spread like wildfire whenever and wherever large numbers of people share small spaces, as in slums or during social or religious congregations, or in trenches during war. The very term ("crowd diseases") had an elitist overtone and theories of social Darwinism and eugenics were quite influential at the time. The prevalent common sense among the upper strata of society was that the poor people were poor and sick because they did not care about personal hygiene and lacked the merit and the enterprise to achieve a higher standard of living. In other words, they themselves were responsible for their plight and the maladies they routinely suffered from. Hardly was the state held responsible for improving the pathetic living conditions of the working people and for prevention of epidemics.

The 1918 flu demolished such notions at least in the context of epidemics and pandemics. While casualties were usually higher among the poor, the rich and the highborn showed no signs of a superior immunity and were infected in great numbers. It was now as plain as day light that blaming the poor and treating them in isolation was not only unjust but absolutely irrational and ineffective. Epidemics needed to be tackled at the population level, irrespective of class and social status, and this could be done only by the state. It was not the first time that such ideas had emerged, but thanks to its vast global spread the 1918 pandemic had a more effective impact on policy makers, pushing them towards state-sponsored healthcare.

An additional stimulus came from the healthcare policy of revolutionary Russia. Immediately after the revolution (November 1917) the Soviet government announced comprehensive social insurance

for workers and for the urban and rural poor, covering illness, injury, maternity, widowhood, old age and unemployment. The entire cost of insurance was to be borne by the employer, in most cases the state. No empty promise this, the first socialist state seriously got down to work (more on this later) and managed to build up a rudimentary public healthcare system that proved effective in treatment and prevention of epidemics and other health issues. The socialist model attracted international appreciation and helped mould public opinion in favour of comprehensive state intervention in the health sector.

So under the twin impacts of the 1918 pandemic and the rise of socialist medicine, governments in many countries started building comprehensive public healthcare systems. The trend gained more traction in the context of the New Deal in the USA and the welfare state policy in Europe, while the establishment of the World Health Organisation in 1946 provided a further boost to the process.

All along, however, there was considerable opposition to public healthcare from vested interests like pharmaceutical companies, private hospitals and so on. In course of time deficiencies in state-run healthcare infrastructures also came to light, making them less popular than before. Finally, with the rise of neoliberalism from the late 1970s, public healthcare concerns receded more and more into the background and private medical institutions and medical insurance companies flourished as one of the most profitable business options. The drift continued over the decades, until Covid-19 happened and shoved the state once again to the forefront. We shall come to this in the next issue.

(To be continued)

Epidemic Act 1897

A Draconian Colonial Hangover

Ujjaini Chatterji

Since March 23rd, the Indian government enforced a complete nationwide lockdown. The Covid-19 pandemic has emerged as the most lethal pandemic of our times. Simultaneously, the management of the crisis by the Indian government has further exposed the growing oppression in their governance. The lack of sufficient testing kits, inadequate personal protective equipments for doctors and caregivers and the inhuman and shameful migrant crisis have also exposed the unpreparedness and misplaced priorities of the Indian government. Yet, instead of engaging with the opposition and hearing out opinions and suggestions, the government of India continues to disregard democracy through the invocation of the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897.

Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897

With Covid-19 as a pretext, the Indian government invoked the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897. The history behind this dated Act, which is over a century old, traces the British colonial memories by which protesters and activists were arbitrarily jailed.

In 1897, the British had passed the Epidemic Act in India to supposedly tackle the bubonic plague that spread in the Madras Presidency. However, the Act's real intention was to suppress dissent against the colonialist regime. The Act became an extension of the Sedition laws and acted as an instrument by which the

British arrested freedom fighters and activists. Significantly, Bal Gangadhar Tilak was arrested and jailed for 18 months for his publication in the *Kesari* and *Mahratta*, criticising the British response to the Bubonic plague epidemic.

The 1897 Act was particularly problematic as it mandated forced segregation of suspected patients, demolition and seizure of private property and strip searches. The language of the Act itself was so fluid that it could be easily manipulated by the authorities to act arbitrarily without any accountability. This had significantly fuelled the anti-colonialist sentiment within India. However, all these happenings were in the colonial, undemocratic and pre constitutional India.

The British, who had created this legislation, themselves, amended and structured it so much more in order to ensure accountability. The Public Health Act 1984 of the United Kingdom leaves no scope for such arbitrary abuse of power. Yet, in India, we continue to use the dated 1897 Act with some very minor amendments that were made in 1956. The Epidemic Act continues to give vast powers to The Act was invoked even previously in India to tackle the outbreaks of Swine flu, dengue, Cholera and now Covid-19.

Suppressing Dissent

In India, the Covid-19 crisis came at a time of an existing turmoil. While peaceful protests across the nation opposed the discriminatory NPR-NRC-CAA process, the pandemic abruptly changed the very nature

of life. While the struggle to save democracy in India persists, the challenges have multiplied. Just like the British colonialists, the Indian government and States across India, are using the vagueness of the wordings of the Epidemic Act to harass and jail dissenters and peaceful protesters.

In Uttar Pradesh, Dr Ashish Mittal was arrested under the Epidemic Act. He had been a part of the peaceful demonstrations against the CAA prior to the Pandemic. Similar charges were also levelled against Umar Khalid, who is also an active voice against the growing fascism of the Indian government.

The Mumbai Police arrested a journalist under the Epidemic Act, with the charge that his social media comments about migrant workers had led to their unrest in the Bandra Suburban area. Several journalists across the country have been detained, charged and harassed for their dissent against the government's approach to Covid-19. Provisions from the Disaster Management Act have also been levelled against journalists and activists for spreading *misleading information*, even when they only were dissenting with the government's approach to the crisis.

The Epidemic Act gives impunity to the public officials working under the Act. And hence, journalists, doctors and people in general are being penalized heavily for dissent against the government. The question however remains that whether the Epidemic Act, can actually sustain in the presence

of the Indian Constitution with its fundamental rights, guarantees and the necessity to protect its basic structure.

The Right to Freedom of Speech and Expression, a fundamental right, guaranteed by the Constitution of India, has suffered another major setback during the Covid-19 nationwide lockdown in India.

Pandemic, Censorship, Accountability and Governance

One of the major reasons for the outbreak of this Covid-19 calamity, was the suppression of information. One doctor who even tried to warn China against this crisis was charged with spreading misleading information, and he eventually died of Covid-19. Even after the spread of the virus, several States of the world continued to downplay its seriousness. And now, when the world is plagued with the biggest public health crisis in the world, our governments continue to hide information and deny accountability.

The inadequacy of the public health system is obvious in India.

And yet, even when doctors write about or even provide suggestions, they are jailed.

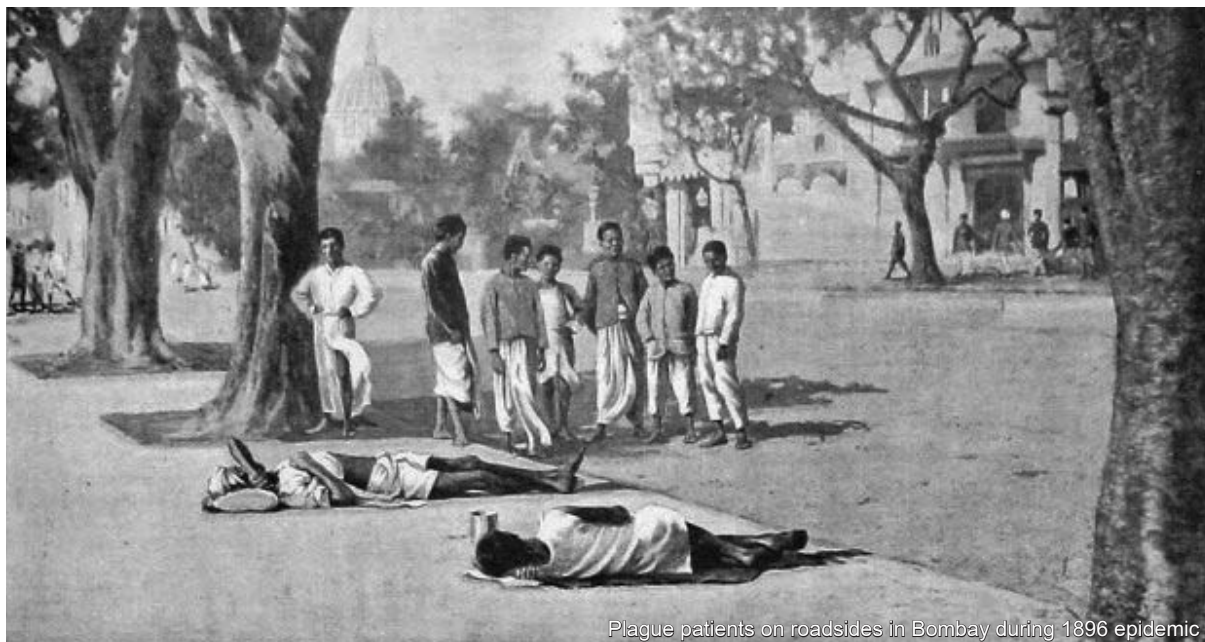
Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, met journalists from leading newspapers of the country and encouraged them to publish only positive stories about the government's handling of the pandemic. This is not just reflective of his megalomania but also the increasing totalitarianism of the government. The government of India, had in fact approached the Supreme Court, praying for a blanket directive to pre censor news to all media publications. Fortunately, the petition did not succeed. Similarly, in the High Court of Madras, there was a petition to ban newspapers during the lockdown, which also did not succeed, though the Court observed that the media should focus on the publication *news* and not *views*.

Fearing consequences of the Epidemic Act, patients infected by the virus are in fact, afraid of coming out and getting themselves tested. Needless to remind, the Epidemic Act was also used to level fake and arbitrary charges against the

attendees of the Tablighi Jamaat in order to spread Islamophobia.

The Covid-19 crisis in India has created challenges far more than the virus. Thousands of migrant workers across the country were left stranded without wages, food and water. Many of them died of exhaustion and thirst while they walked back thousands of kilometres home. Yet, the government remained unperturbed and refused to engage on democratic processes to find solutions by engaging with opposition parties and dissenters.

At a time of crisis as now, it is pertinent that the Government of India, along with the State Governments, engage in an inclusive method of problem solving. The challenge of the pandemic cannot be mitigated without accountability and shared decision making. Suppression of data and criminalization of dissent shall only complicate our situation and not mitigate the challenge. The Covid-19 challenge needs to be faced with democracy, compassion and kindness instead of authoritarian arbitrariness and hate. ■



Plague patients on roadsides in Bombay during 1896 epidemic.

Kerala Model Delivers in Covid -19 Control

Dr E P Mohan

Kerala is in limelight in the international media for its performance in dealing with the Covid-19 crisis. Critics of the acclaimed “Kerala Model of Development” have argued that the development paradigm in Kerala Model is not sustainable in the long run nor acceptable as a taken for granted remedy, and have pointed out many contradictions inherent in this model.

But even those who were arguing that the Kerala welfare model had long been outdated and stagnant, have now seen that the very same infrastructure generated through decades of hard labour in the state, came to our rescue in these crucial days of Covid-19 pandemic.

No sooner outbreak of novel corona virus in Wuhan did get officially reported by China on January 20, 2020 and subsequently WHO cautioned the world, Kerala had started preparations to deal with the pandemic. The first case of Covid-19 in the country relates to a batch of students returning from Wuhan to Kerala in the end of January. These students after having been kept in isolation and few of them tested positive, they were given treatment and all hospitalized care. Their contact trails could be successfully mapped and thus probable secondary transmissions were blocked with cent percent efficiency. When this episode was successfully overcome, it marked the closure of first chapter of Covid-19 in India.

Then the second episode of Covid-19 was experienced by Kerala. In the evening of February 29, three members of a Kerala family landed at Cochin International airport.

They had started their journey a day before from Venice in Italy, which at that time was the country with the second largest number of Covid-19 patients and deaths, immediately after China. Actually they had somehow managed to make their exit escaping the screening formalities at the airport for tracing passengers coming from abroad who might be infected or could be potential carriers of Covid-19. Until March 3rd these arrangements in airports were quite loose. By the time the authorities could trace these three, and collect all details about the people and places they visited after returning from Italy, two elderly people in their own family and many others were already affected. However, all these affected people were hospitalized and given proper medical care so that all of them recovered and left hospitals in few weeks. In this episode, all who suspected to have had primary contacts also were put on observation under home quarantine; tests were done and in cases found positive, hospital care was given. A similar procedure has been successfully adopted in more cases involving people traveling from abroad as well as coming from other states.

Certain telling statistics about Kerala in the case of primary spread of Covid-19 from affected patients to others has come up. It is seen that while the picture in the whole country or even world wide is like 2.5 to 3 people getting Covid-19 infection from primary contacts with a single patient (in other words, 250 to 300 persons get infected from 100 primary patients), in the Kerala scenario, the ratio

of infection by primary contact is just one for three (33 people got infected from 100 patients). This has been achieved by scientific, professional practices of institutional quarantine, including isolation and hospitalised care for symptomatic patients and home quarantines for other suspected patients. Kerala's health infrastructure and Government tapped into its own experience in combating previous epidemics. There was clear, effective communication from the Government, explaining the practices needed but steering clear of narratives that would stigmatise or communalise Covid-19 patients. In the absence of such practices and infrastructure, there would have been a much higher number of people infected through primary transmission in Kerala as well. In the case of all people put under observation in home quarantine, health workers would regularly visit them twice each day to ensure successful quarantine. For this, health committees are formed at ward levels with which ASHA workers, Health Inspectors, Field Medical Officers work in a co-ordinated manner. All the information received by them through such work were passed on to the PHCs and DMO offices on a daily basis. After reviewing all developments on a day to day basis, corrective measures are taken with the help of district administrations.

In the case of Keralite employees, workers, students, and others living in other states who wanted to return to Kerala, their entry was strictly regulated through mandatory entry passes from designated authorities

at check-points set up at the inter state borders. This gave rise to several criticisms but such a drastic measure had to be taken only to make quarantine and observation most effective in the case of each person coming in from other states. In view of the essential preparation and arrangements needed to carry out the process, their entry could only be allowed in a phased manner based on our given capacity and infrastructure.

According to the available information so far, just around 0.5 % of Covid-19 affected patients have died in Kerala. With two deaths reported latest on a single day, there can possibly be a small change in the above figure. But

still, one can see the contrast with many other states where the death rates are staggeringly higher like between 4% and 5%.

The experience so far undergone by Kerala in fighting the Covid-19 menace is unprecedented. From Anganwadi-ASHA workers to doctors, officials in police, revenue, labour departments, IT professionals, people's representatives, young volunteers recruited in local self administrative bodies exclusively for assisting in Covid-19 combat, all were mobilized, attaining a new level of efficiency of our public institutions.

This was also an occasion when people of Kerala witnessed members of its bureaucracy and police less in

their conventional roles as agents of an oppressive state and more in their ascribed roles as true public servants. This change would not have been possible without the kind of matching administrative and political leadership at the helm of affairs.

Many have noted that the pandemic might prove itself capable of forcefully reasserting the truth about the real strength of public healthcare system and upturning the myth of privatization as panacea for all ills. The Kerala experience certainly bears out this hypothesis. □

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A Note on Herd Immunity

Dr Raja

The concept of Herd Immunity is premised on the following facts:

That a vaccine, given to a majority of a given population at about the same time raises immunity of that population in that community so that the infective organism cannot find susceptible persons to infect easily and hence peters away in that community. In general, if about 80% in the community are vaccinated, the antibody levels will be uniformly similar in all those who are vaccinated so that the remaining 20 % do not get the infection.

Some virologists and epidemiologists want to apply this concept of herd immunity to the present pandemic. Their recommendations are based on following assumptions:

- 1] This is essentially a viral illness with less mortality.
- 2] Only vulnerable with co-morbidities like diabetes get serious complications and some of them may probably die.
- 3] Most remain asymptomatic. Varying figures are given; according to the Government of Tamil Nadu it is over 80% in TN.
- 4] Among those who develop symptoms, most develop mild symptoms like fever or cough which are mostly self-limiting. Less than 1% develops serious complications and they can be treated in ICUs.
- 5] Lockdowns have not prevented the spread and result in huge economic loss to the country and the poor

are the worst affected.

6] There are no known specific medicines and a vaccine against this virus, if at all possible, is certainly at least a year away.

7] Therefore open up all economic activities. Most people will get asymptomatic viremia and among those who develop symptoms, less than 1% may become seriously ill and some old people with co-morbidities would die. This is something similar to the annual influenza death in the US or UK and nothing more. This way we can get over this pandemic with less human and social loss and at the shortest possible time.

This looks attractive in theory. This is politically popular too because we are talking about preventing poor people dying of hunger and other diseases due to lockdown. Lifting lockdown may end their financial miseries.

But if we look at this disease more carefully we notice:

- 1] This virus is totally unknown to humanity.
- 2] It does not have stereotypical behaviour. The death rate varies widely across countries and even inside countries it varies from region to region. In India it is around 3 to 4 %. In TN it is less than 1%. Globally it is around 6.5%. Almost all countries like to underreport fatalities; hence published fatalities will always be lesser than the actual fatalities, more so in third world countries

where data fudging is easy.

3] We still do not know if the majority remain asymptomatic. Spain, Italy, UK and US experiences are to the contrary. Most infected people had moderate to severe symptoms and needed hospitalisation and ventilation etc. We have seen how health systems were crippled and thrown out of gear in most European countries and USA.

4] It is far too simplistic to say that only old and vulnerable people die. The South American example especially Brazil disproves this assumption quite conclusively. 15% of deaths in Brazil are in the age group under 50. Mexico is worse. One quarter of all deaths in Mexico are in the age group 25 to 49. Many people do not realise that even in India about 50% of deaths are in people below the age of 60.

5] This disease is certainly not like flu. Even amongst those who become symptomatic, it runs a variable course. It leaves lasting damage on organs like lungs and kidneys in many patients. Some people suffer for as long as 40 days. So simplistic conclusions about this disease are wrong. In severely ill patients the outcomes are simply unpredictable. More than 90% of those who required ventilators did not come out of it alive in the initial period. Now with better understanding of the peculiar pathology of this disease the ventilator fatality is reduced to around 50%. Those who come out have severe multi-organ injuries and lasting morbidities.

6] It induces a pro-thrombotic state and there are serious discussions in professional circles that many sudden heart attacks and strokes may be due to this.

7] Many countries are already speaking about the second wave. Even after such a severe spread in Spain, the recent random antibody testing shows that only 5% have detectable high titre of antibodies. In other words, 95% Spaniards are still susceptible to an attack by this virus. If herd immunity cannot develop in Spain, is it realistic to expect that it may do so elsewhere especially in a country like India?

9] Except for states like TN and Kerala, the care for those poor people who develop serious infection needing ICU care/ventilation, is virtually non-existent in most states. Private sector is extremely expensive and even that is not available in many states. Therefore it is a dangerous thing to open up without having the ability to manage the consequences.

10] According to one calculation, to achieve herd immunity in India, at least 80 to 90 crore people should be infected [about 60 to 70% of the population] of which 8 to 9 crore [10% of the infected persons] would require hospitalisation and about 80 lakhs to 2.7crores [1-3%] will die. Do we have ICU facilities for such numbers and

is this mortality socially acceptable?

Therefore to parrot herd immunity theory is not very convincing medically. It is welcome if it happens as a result of widespread infection. But to deliberately expose a huge population with the hope of development of herd immunity is not scientifically convincing. Let me reiterate that for this present pandemic herd immunity is still largely a theoretical construct.

To come to the practical aspects: we have seen that though this virus entered this country through airports, it nestles in the slums of Mumbai, Ahmedabad and Chennai. It is true that lockdown affects the poor more than the rich who have means to survive many months of lockdown without many problems. It is also equally true that once opened, it is the poor who are going to work in sweatshops and shop floors and get infected. The rich will certainly protect themselves well and it is the poor who are going to get more infections when lockdown is lifted. In New York, death rate in low income communities of colour is 10 times greater than the wealthier ones. When we talk about exposing the 80% to protect the 20% we must be very clear as to who form this 80% and who form the 20%. When we talk about protecting the vulnerable, we are really talking about the rich and vulnerable and not the poor and vulnerable. The poor people of India still live in joint families where grandparents and grandchildren live huddled in crowded bastis of less than 500 sq.ft. Unlike the affluent West, there are simply no means to protect the poor and vulnerable old people in India.

What then is the way out? Vaccine and antiviral medicines are many years away. Hence the age old wisdom of "Prevention is better than Cure" is very true of this disease with varied manifestations and unpredictable outcomes. This is much, much cheaper than the costs of 'Herd Immunity'. Fortunately in TN, Maharashtra and in Gujarat, this disease is rampant only in certain pockets. So ideally we must increase our testing numbers drastically in these areas so that the source of these clusters are found out and isolated. It is stupid to follow ICMR guidelines about not testing asymptomatic persons. In these clusters it is the asymptomatic persons who are seeding infections continually and hence our high numbers from the same areas day after day.

And other than these Red Zones and containment areas we should gradually open up economic activities ensuring that the three cardinal principles of prevention – physical distancing, hand washing and masking - are very strictly enforced in public places and places of work at least till this epidemic is brought under control. This works in several countries and this will work in India too. The Swedish way is simply not replicable in India. □

Modi Regime's War on Working Class

V Shankar

The Modi government has declared a veritable war on the working class of the country. Modi warned in his televised address that people should be ready for “bold reforms”. BJP-led state governments of UP, MP and Gujarat, of course under the blessings of Modi's central government, have already scrapped or rendered labour laws totally ineffective. Several states, including Uttarakhand, Haryana, Assam, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan and Punjab have increased working hours to 12 hours a day, some with and some without overtime wages, and for three months if not three years as in the case of other states.

The BJP government has cunningly chosen this critical period of medical emergency to push through all its anti-people measures under the garb of Covid-19. Normally, the anti-worker measures would have met with a massive resistance from workers, but with the lockdown and Epidemics and Disaster Management act in force, workers are handicapped in responding to the government's systematic assault on labour laws.

Self-reliant India cannot just be built based on dependence on foreign capital and certainly not by scrapping labour laws to attract capital from outside. For Modi, self-reliance is only a rhetoric and doesn't really mean self-reliance of the country and its own people. Talking about self-reliance while pushing workers and toilers into slavery and bondage and making India subservient to global capital and imperialist powers is nothing but a mockery.

Mounting Miseries of Migrant Workers

The biggest victim of unplanned and abrupt Lockdown is crores and crores of migrant labourers stranded without food, shelter and money all over the country. Overwhelming majority of these migrant labourers hail from a socially oppressed and disadvantaged background. With factories closed and work and earnings drying up, migrant labourers are understandably desperate to return to their homes, but the government is obstructing their return by all possible means. The cruelty meted out to the migrant workers reeks of a clear design to strip them of all their rights and dignity and reduce them to conditions of bonded labour.

Frontline workers, particularly ASHA, Anganwadi, mid-day meal, housekeeping and sanitation workers are offered only empty rhetorical respect as Corona warriors but in real life most of them are not even recognised as workers, not to talk of minimum wages or any kind of additional remuneration as pandemic pay for battling the pandemic from the front.

Initially after the declaration of lockdown the government appealed to employers not to cut jobs or wages. In one of its orders the Home Ministry had even made it legally mandatory. But with employers complaining against this order, the government surreptitiously withdrew this crucial provision in its subsequent notifications. Unlike the packages announced by most countries that ensured full or substantial payment of lockdown period wages to workers, Modi government's so-

called stimulus package of 20 lakh crores had no such component. In fact, the government took the lead to announce a wage cut of 30 percent for central government and PSU employees and freeze their dearness allowance. Wage cut and mass retrenchment appears to be emerging as a concerted strategy of the state and private employers.

Scrapping Laws for Cheap Labour

The Modi government was already in the process of scuttling and rewriting India's labour laws in the name of rationalisation. The pandemic and the lockdown are now being used as an opportunity to accelerate and intensify that process. The Adityanath government of Uttar Pradesh has already promulgated an ordinance suspending almost all labour laws for a period of three years in the name of economic reconstruction. All inherent rights of workers earned through militant struggles, innumerable sacrifices and guaranteed by the constitution – right from 8-hour workday, minimum wages, ESI, PF, gratuity, grievance redressal and conciliation mechanism of labour departments and labour courts, system of inspection, right to form union and recognition, the question of regularisation - stand abrogated at a single stroke of the pen.

This is being presented as an incentive to wean capital away from China to India and thus as a tool of self-reliance. Several other BJP-led governments like Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Gujarat and Karnataka are also following similar measures. In Karnataka, the BSY government first stopped trains

for migrant workers at the behest of the builder and mining lobbies and after it was forced to reverse the decision in the face of massive opposition it went on to transfer the labour secretary to appease the employers' association in the state. Non-BJP states like Rajasthan, Punjab, Tamil Nadu and Odisha have also begun to move in this direction of truncation of labour rights.

Increasing Work Hours from 8 to 12

A common feature of the ongoing attack on labour rights revolves around increasing the length of a working day from 8 to 12 hours. By increasing working hours from 8 to 12 hours, the government claims that companies can operate with 50 percent or 65 percent labour force to fight Covid-19. But, this is nothing but a cunning strategy of the government to reduce existing workforce by 35 or 50 percent in each company. It has not protected the workforce from the threat of retrenchment or wage cut but has dedicated itself to protect corporate profits. The government is gleefully reducing PF contribution by 4 percent and is offering to pay the revised share of 10 percent of both employers and employees, but PF shares are still being deducted from workers' wages by many employers.

The reverse migration of migrant workers is bound to increase labour availability in traditional labour-exporting states, but there is no plan to absorb and accommodate this labour by either expanding and improving the terms of NREGA or bringing in a similar employment guarantee legislation for urban workers. The net result will be increased unemployment leading to further depression of wages

and erosion of the bargaining power of the working class. A lean workforce subjected to hire and fire and depressed wages seems to be the Modi government's incentive scheme to appease global capital in the guise of its new found mantra of self-reliance.

The lockdown has resulted in massive miseries for vast sections of India's working class. Now as

the government moves towards a clumsy exit from the chaotic and cruel lockdown, it will seek to perpetuate these miseries through a permanent erosion of the legal rights and bargaining power of the working class. While resisting the cruelties of lockdown, the working class movement will have to get ready to fight back and foil this design. □



Countrywide protests were held against suspension of labour laws, workers in TN



Bihar



Srikulam, Andhra Pradesh, 18 May

Attacks on Students and Public Education

N Sai Balaji

The nationwide lockdown has come down heavily on all sections of society in some way or the other but barriers of class, caste and governmental apathy has rendered some at the margins of life and death. Among those who have been completely overlooked and whose concerns have failed to ring any alarm in the minds of those sitting in power, is the student and youth community, in a nation where more than 50% of the population is below 25 years of age. On the contrary, the lockdown has been effectively used as an opportunity to witch-hunt students and activists, intimidate and harass them and frame them under draconian laws of UAPA.

However, this does not come to

us as a surprise given the history of this regime with the student community and the continuous attack we have been facing in terms of structural destruction of public education as well as political contestations. As a matter of fact, in a scenario where the Indian political stage looks rather devoid of a strong, vocal opposition, the students have come out as a consistent voice of resistance, asserting and reasserting their identity as opposed to that being imposed by the ruling party ideology and coming out on the streets defending what they believe in. The CAA-NRC-NPR protests assumed a central stage in the national debate with students of Jamia, DU, JNU, AMU and others coming out on the

roads time and again braving police lathis and brutal, lethal attacks by the right wing to defend the constitution and reject the divisive politics.

AISA has played a major role in providing vision, direction and the necessary thrust to these movements as and when the situations demanded. With an aim to unite the CAA-NRC protests across the nation, AISA spearheaded the Young India platform bringing together movements and organisations for a united and coordinated struggle in defence of the constitution. The idea of preamble reading as a sign of protest as well as that of asserting our national ideals was taken forward enthusiastically by

** No To Online Exams*

** Immediately Declare Rent Waiver for Students*

** Immediately Declare School, College and University Fee Waiver.*

** Ensure Coordinated and Common Academic Year Across the Country*

** Release all Pending Fellowships Immediately*

** Ensure Safe Transportation of All Students Stranded and Wanting to go home after necessary testing.*

** Declare Universal Basic Income*

** Declare Universal Rations and Ensure Rations for Students on College, University or Educational institute ID card.*

** Immediate Moratorium on payment of Educational loan for at least six months with interest waiver on all education loans for next two years*

** Special Package and fund allocation for needs of Disabled Students*

** Stop Witch Hunting of students and activists who stood by the Constitution against the communally divisive CAA-NRC-NPR being politically harassed, arrested, jailed during the pandemic, while the leaders of BJP leaders who stoked communal frenzy leading to riots and those engaged in wanton violence in campuses are being given impunity despite enough recorded evidences.*

people across the country and even by the Indian diaspora abroad.

No wonder then that the regime's witch hunt of those speaking against it is increasingly being directed against AISA activists. Comrade Kawalpreet Kaur who is currently the President of Delhi AISA has her phone siezed in the name of investigation. Chandan Kumar, a student of Jamia has been repeatedly called to the police station amidst lockdown for interrogation, and his phones seized under UAPA.

Asif Iqbal a student from Jamia was arrested on 17th May 2020 for protests against CAA-NRC-NPR and subsequently he is also being linked to the UAPA FIR. The filing of false FIRs, arresting of Jamia students and members of Jamia Coordination Committee (JCC) Meeran, Safoora and others and subsequent slapping of UAPA on them is clearly aimed at shielding the actual perpetrators and establishing the script prepared by the RSS-BJP brigade.

AISA has previously exposed how the Delhi Police claims "investigations" and "evidence" on students from DU, Jamia and JNU along with student organizations like AISA and other students is nothing but a script prepared by the RSS-BJP brigade. This script was then amplified by its supporters like Monica Arora, more than a month before the Delhi Police's supposed "investigations"! This is not the first time Delhi Police (controlled by Home Ministry) has presented right-wing fabrications as its own "evidence". We may well recall how after the violence by masked ABVP thugs in JNU, the Delhi Police had held a press conference presenting photographs and videos circulated by RSS-BJP-ABVP affiliated social media accounts, as "evidence" gathered by a police "investigation"!

Meanwhile, the Delhi Police, we

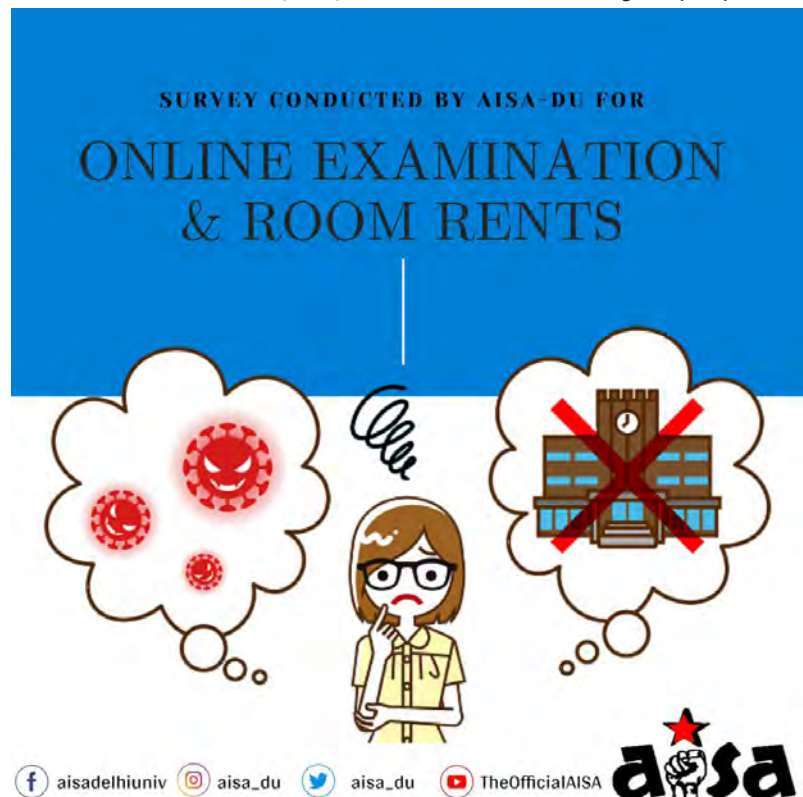
may recall, has refused to act on the copious evidence about the role of BJP leaders like Kapil Mishra, in inciting the targeted violence and riots which gripped large parts of NE Delhi. Similarly there is still no action against the shrill venomous calls and speeches by the likes of Anurag Thakurs and Parvesh Verma in the run up to the Delhi elections, clearly geared to fan communal hate.

The Delhi Police has also ignored evidence that ABVP leader Komal Sharma and other ABVP thugs entered JNU campus wearing masks and indulged in violence that threatened the lives of students and teachers. Likewise the NIA has ignored the evidence of the involvement of right wing brigades led by Sambhaji Bhide and Milind Ekbote in the violence against Dalits at Bhima Koregaon. In both Delhi riots, as well as Bhima Koregaon and JNU, it is the victims of the violence and their allies and voices of dissent who are being targeted

– while the actual perpetrators of violence go scot free.

AISA Resistance and Fight for Workers:

However, if the government is finding new methods of oppression and silencing, dissent and democracy have found their own ways. The lockdown and its massacres have unveiled the most vicious face of the government and given us visuals of plight and suffering that will continue to haunt our memories for the rest of our lives. The student community has again come out as one of the most sensitive segments of society, raising questions and concerns and demanding answers. With the limitation on public gathering and restrictions on movement, we have effectively used social media as our site of protest and have come up with innovative ways of communicating to people our



concerns and demands. Pictures with placards, use of effective hashtags, facebook lives, public lectures, twitter storms and reading of resistance poems have all added to the bandwidth of the struggle.

Social media is an unequal platform. Those without any internet connection and smart phone are left out right at the point of entry. It was imperative their voices and struggles also echoed in the social media. The intervention of student-youth, especially AISA has been to ensure we don't only speak for ourselves but also fight for those who aren't on the internet. Be those millions of migrant workers who are walking or those millions who were starving with the sudden declaration of lockdown. AISA along with student-youth across the country did what we had to. Stood and fought for the oppressed and spoke for the voiceless. AISA and students did this as their duty.

Be it participating in AICCTU and other trade union calls of demanding universal ration for all, getting governments out of their slumber to deliver food and rations, forming

mohalla kitchens like comrades from Banaras, Odisha, Kurnool (Andhra Pradesh) and other places did and taking up action programmes to inspire and motivate student-youth communities to fight against the misery of the working people, AISA has wholeheartedly sought to rise to the occasion despite the limitations dictated by the lockdown. AISA has successfully spearheaded student-youth protests across India against #LockdownMassacres after the brutal killing of workers sleeping on railway track in Aurangabad, Maharashtra and is coordinating with various organisations and civil society in bringing to light the truth of migrant worker crisis.

Lockdown, Online Exams, Fellowships, Fees, Rent and Basic Facilities: Concerns of the Student Community Nationwide

PM Modi announced a 20 lakh crore relief package two months into the lockdown which turned

out to be another 'jumla'. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitaraman then came on TV discussing the details of the package. However, students and their concerns remained conspicuously absent even in the jumlas. With the nation heading towards an economic slowdown like a vehicle without brakes, the student-youth problems cannot be overlooked. We have been demanding a Student Action Plan since the beginning of the lockdown and have been relentlessly reiterating these demands since then.

Exposing the 20 lakh crore economic package Jumla AISA along with various student-youth organisations planned and participated in a nationwide protest on 20th May on the issue. Student-youth activists across the country raised black flags on home, made posters with demands, and exposed the abject failure and total betrayal by a regime which continues to wax eloquent about reaping the dividends from India's vibrant demography. □

The Pandemic's India Journey: Short Takes

Kavita Krishnan

The Social Pattern of Covid-19 Deaths

In the US, 13% of the population makes up 32% of the deaths from COVID-19. According to a Washington Post analysis, counties that are majority black have almost six times the rate of deaths as counties where white residents are in the majority. In Wisconsin, black people are just 6% of the population and nearly 40% of COVID-19 fatalities. In Michigan, black people represent

14% of the state's population but 40% of its deaths. In Kansas, only 6% of the population is black, but black people account for more than 30% of the deaths. In Louisiana, black people make up 33% of the state's population but 70% of COVID-19 fatalities. In Mississippi, black people are 38% of the population but account for 66% of deaths.

In India, of course, we still do not have accurate countrywide data in the public domain on Covid-19 cases and deaths, let alone any

socio-economic breakup. But some reports are revealing. Tabassum Barnagarwala reported in the Indian Express on May 7, 2020 that "of the 548 deaths recorded in Maharashtra as of May 3, 239 (44 per cent) are from the minority Muslim community — almost thrice their share (just under 12 per cent) in the state's population." The number of infected persons from the Tablighi Jamaat event in Delhi was actually very low — just 69 in all of Maharashtra. So what was the reason for Muslims'

disproportionate representation in the Covid-19 deaths?

Barnagarwala reports that “a significant share of the (Muslim) community lives in neighbourhoods where social distancing is difficult, population density is high, and access to healthcare poor.” State epidemiologist Pradeep Awate told her, “The cases are spreading in slums not because of a particular religious group, but because of poor living conditions. And in the slums, Muslims are in large numbers. At least 8-10 people live in a small room where social distancing is difficult.” Muslims in India are disproportionately poor, as the Sachar Committee report had established.

But while the Tablighi Jamaat meeting in Delhi itself did not lead to a surge in cases in Maharashtra, the communal political and media campaign around it perhaps did, writes Barnagarwala. She quotes Bhiwandi MLA Rais Shaikh: “The Tablighi Jamaat episode instilled fear in the community. They do not report symptoms fearing they will be stigmatised.”

The Maharashtra Government, taking note of this issue, took special measures to reassure the minority community, requesting mosques and maulanas to help spread the message that Muslims should not fear to report symptoms. But the story in other states is very different.

Communal Virus

There are many instances of hospitals denying treatment to persons because they are Muslim, equating Muslims with Covid-19 infection. In Jharkhand, Rajasthan, and Bihar, there have been instances of pregnant Muslim women losing newborns after being denied treatment by medical staff who said Muslims spread Covid-19. AIPWA and CPIML in Bihar took up the cause of Gulshan Khatoon who was

denied treatment in a Buxar hospital on account of being Muslim.

There have been multiple instances of street vendors facing boycott or violence because of being Muslim and therefore equated with Covid-19.

Privatisation of Health

Mumbai is one of the cities worst affected by Covid-19 in the world. Interestingly, journalist Tabassum Barnagarwala of the Indian Express told data journalist Rukmini S (on the latter's nightly podcast The Moving Curve), that “BMC and Mumbai Government hospitals are ramping up Covid-19 beds. A huge problem is the (lack of) participation of private hospitals in the pandemic. The Government is taking care of 80% of Covid patients, with the private hospitals taking care of a mere 20%”. Remember this fact, when governments tell us that healthcare must be privatised, private hospitals be provided heavily subsidised land, and the needs of poor patients can be taken care of through Ayushman Bharat type health insurance and through beds reserved for the latter in private hospitals. In a pandemic, the private hospitals which are flush with resources, refused to step up and provide care to the needy. If it is government hospitals which must come to the rescue in times of greatest need, then why not invest in them rather than in privatised healthcare? How would Ayushman insurance help poor patients if the private hospitals simply do not provide Covid-19 beds?!

Gujarat Model

Gujarat has emerged as one of the worst states in India when it comes to handling Covid-19. Gujarat was ruled by Narendra Modi from 2001-2014, and during his first bid for the post of

PM, his media managers touted the “Gujarat Model” of development that Modi would now bring to the rest of India. Here are highlights from Modi's model state:

Highest death rate: Gujarat has the highest Covid-19 death rate in India – 6%.

Body at bus stop: The body of Covid-19 patient Chhagan Makwana (67) admitted at Ahmedabad Civil Hospital, was found dumped at a bus stop. Hospital authorities did not inform the family of the man's death, and could not explain how the body of their patient ended up at a bus stop.

Fake ventilators to benefit cronies: Gujarat Chief Minister Vijay Rupani promoted a Rajkot-based private company's “breathing apparatus” as “ventilators” supplied free of cost to Ahmedabad hospitals. The company's CEO is the CM's friend Parakramsinh Jadeja. The State Government in a press release claimed, “Rajkot-based private company Jyoti CNC had developed the ventilator 'Dhaman-1' in a very short period of just 10 days. The manufacturing cost of Dhaman-1 is less than Rs 1-lakh per piece. This great achievement would add a new feather to Prime Minister Narendrabhai Modi's dream campaign of 'Make in India.' It later turned out the “ventilator” was fake, and was in fact a mere “ambu-bag.” Ahmedabad Civil Hospital Medical Superintendent JV Modi wrote to the managing director of Gandhinagar-based Gujarat Medical Services Corporation Limited (GMSCL) for 50 'high-end' ICU ventilators for the 1,200-bed COVID-19 facility. He quoted a letter from the head of the anaesthesia department of the BJ Medical College, affiliated to the Civil Hospital, stating that they are not getting the “desired result” from Dhaman-1 and AGVA ventilators.

Profiteering from the pandemic: The Rupani Government began

selling N95 masks to the public – at a profit of 31%!

State's Best Hospital Is Worse Than a Dungeon: The Gujarat High Court observed that the Ahmedabad Civil Hospital was "pathetic...as good as a dungeon, maybe worse", and described Gujarat as "one of worst affected states" in the country due to "lack of PPE, shortage of ventilators, ICUs and isolating wards....". For good measure the High Court added that "there is no single command and control structure in Civil Hospital" and "the health minister of Gujarat does not seem to be aware of what is going on, nor appears to have ever visited the hospital". The judges, in their order, asked "We wonder how many times the Health Minister has visited the Civil Hospital to take a stock of the situation? Does he have any idea of the problems faced by the patients and even the employees working there? The same goes for the Health Secretary. Is the state government even aware of the hard fact that patients at the Civil Hospital are dying because of lack of ventilators? How does the government prepare itself to tackle this problem of ventilators? It is distressing to know that most patients admitted the hospital are dying within 4 to 5 days of treatment, which indicates a complete lack of critical care."

Islamophobic Apartheid: The Ahmedabad Civil Hospital separated Hindu and Muslim coronavirus patients.

Witch-hunt During Pandemic

In the midst of the pandemic, the Delhi Police at the behest of India's Home Minister Amit Shah is busy harassing and arresting students, anti-CAA activists, and feminists, under draconian laws. Sociologist Nandini Sundar rightly observes that Shah is replicating the 'Bhima Koregaon model' in Delhi. In Bhima Koregaon

and in the violence in NE Delhi, the real perpetrators of the violence (close associates or leaders of the ruling BJP) were left scot-free, while the victims of the violence (Dalits in Bhima Koregaon and Muslims in Delhi), as well as organisers of democratic protests, are arrested and charged with the crimes!

In Delhi, Jamia student activists Meeran Haider, Safoora Zargar, Asif Tanha, Jamia alumni association president Shifa-ur Rahman, anti-CAA activists Ishrat Jahan, Khalid Saifi, and Gulfisha, and Natasha Narwal and Devangana Kalita, activists of the feminist group Pinjra Tod have been arrested. When courts pointed out that no evidence had been presented and so gave bail to some of these young activists, Delhi Police promptly rearrested them under another FIR, or even under the draconian UAPA, under which bail is nearly impossible to get. Under these FIRs in the NE Delhi violence cases, the Delhi Police is also targeting activists of AISA and other students, confiscating phones and "interrogating" them for days on end, calling them to the Special Cell office at Lodhi Road where a constable was diagnosed with Covid-19.

"Samvidhan Ke Char Sipahi-Hindu Muslim Sikh Isai" (Four soldiers of the Constitution – Hindu Muslim Sikh and Christian) was the slogan of the anti-CAA protests. Those who raised that slogan are being arrested, while Kapil Mishra, Anurag Thakur and other BJP leaders who raised "Desh Ke Gaddaro Ko Goli Maro Salo Ko" (shoot the traitorous b...s) are left free.

The BJP IT Cell and even leaders like Kapil Mishra are using social media to slut-shame the women activists who are arrested. Kapil Mishra tweeted a sexual innuendo about Safoora Zargar, and a series of morphed photos and videos of Jamia women, placing their faces on pornographic images of women, was circulated on social media.

Meanwhile, Covid-19 too is being used as a pretext to target any kind of dissent. The lockdown is helping to create a climate where any criticism of the government is leading to arrest and police harassment. Com. Bibek Das, CCM of CPIML from Assam, a staunch fighter for the rights of tea workers for decades and convenor of the anti-CAA platform in the state, was named in an FIR for social media posts raising questions about the BJP Government and BJP MLAs. The police seized his phone, but they could not arrest him because he was granted bail by the Gauhati HC.

Meanwhile in Tamil Nadu, an FIR was filed against CPIML and AICCTU activist Comrade Sahayam, at the behest of Adani's Sterlite corporation.

In Andhra Pradesh following the Vizag gas leak, a 60-year-old woman P Ranganayaki raised 20 questions on social media – asking why there were no arrests in the Vizag gas leak case and why the government allowed the leftover Styrene to be sent back to South Korea. The AP police filed a case against her!

In UP, many CPIML activists were harassed or arrested by police for protesting from home against the Government's unplanned lockdown. □



Open Letter to British Labour Party Leader:

Don't Align the Labour Party with Allies of Modi's Far-Right Regime

[The Left, anti-racist and anti-fascist activists in the UK, inside and outside the Labour Party, have issued an open letter addressed to the leader of the Labour Party in Britain Keir Starmer asking him to refrain from aligning the Labour Party with far right Hindutva organisations in Britain.]

Dear Keir,

We are deeply concerned that you are attempting to improve the Labour Party's relationship with the Indian diaspora by reaching out to the Hindu Forum of Britain (HFB), an organisation closely aligned with Narendra Modi's far-right and Hindu supremacist government. Allying yourself with the HFB suggests that you are condoning the human rights abuses committed by Indian government and endorsing the fascist policies which have brought it into international notoriety and highlighted Modi's position among far-right leaders globally.

In the last year alone these policies have included:

The revocation of Article 370 of the Indian Constitution which represented Kashmir's limited autonomy.

This is an act of colonialism by the BJP government against a nation which has been denied its historic right to self-determination, first by the British colonialists who were responsible for Partition in 1947. Kashmir has faced decades of occupation by the Indian army and human rights abuses^a and has been followed by brutal lockdowns, curfews and increased repression in a region which has long been the most highly militarised in the world.

Imposition of exclusionary and Islamophobic Citizenship Laws and processes

The Citizenship (Amendment)

[a] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/nov/08/india-crackdown-in-kashmir-is-this-worlds-first-mass-blinding>

Act which was passed in December 2019 and the National Register of Citizens and National Population Register would lead to the disenfranchisement of millions of Muslims across India and are widely seen as the first step to ethnic cleansing^b.

Contrary to their assertions in their letters to you, the HFB does not represent the entirety of the Indian diaspora in the UK. Many Labour Party members who are part of this diaspora have actively condemned not only these human rights abuses but also the lynchings of Muslims, Dalits and other minorities by mobs affiliated to the RSS, which is a fascist organization modelled on Mussolini's Blackshirts^c and is the parent organization of the BJP. These mob attacks have been rampant since Modi's initial rise to power in 2014^d. To attempt to rebuild ties with the 'Indian community' in the UK by reaching out to far-right sympathising organisations such as HFB, is to ignore us and suggest that the Labour Party will from now on be more concerned with maintaining the support of far-right groups within the Indian diaspora than with sticking to the Labour internationalist principle

[b] <https://www.outlookindia.com/newscroll/what-happened-in-hitlers-germany-in-1930s-happening-in-india-now-amarinder-singh-on-caa/1711014>

[c] <http://www.sacw.net/DC/CommunalismCollection/ArticlesArchive/casolari.pdf>

[d] <https://www.counterfire.org/articles/opinion/19148-india-s-hindu-supremacist-lynching-epidemic-trump-the-tories-and-the-legacies-of-colonialism>

of condemning international human rights abuses.

Most tellingly, the HFB letter describes the points it raises as 'issues of concern to the Hindu/Indian community', implicitly denying the existence of hundreds of thousands of non-Hindu Indians in the UK (Sikhs, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists and people of no faith) including many that are outspokenly against the atrocities committed by the Modi regime.

The issues raised in the first HFB letter to you are:

Firstly, the caste discrimination legislation - a law which Dalit organisations have campaigned for since 2000 in response to the caste discrimination and abuse which is rife among the Indian diaspora in the UK^e. The law was effectively passed with the Enterprise and Regulatory Reform Act 2013 imposing a 'duty' on the government to make caste an aspect of race in the Equality Act of 2010 but has since been scuppered by the Tories in response to pressure from the HFB and other Hindu Right organisations. HFB describes it as 'a corrupt piece of legislation that targets the Hindu community'. This evokes the Hindu-right argument that caste discrimination is a colonial myth created by the British to undermine Hinduism. It ignores the well-known and widely documented reality that Indian society is itself stratified according to caste and atrocities against oppressed castes are not

[e] https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0009f7v?fbclid=IwAR35al2ogp9xBK610Bbz9KxluYjJsS1pQ4pfC_nGOeBBF1UEge3iYkOoc

only widespread but according to the government's own figures have increased under the Modi government^f.

The second issue raised in the HFB letter is Labour's policy on Kashmir, passed by the Labour Party Conference, under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. The letter claims Corbyn's supporting a motion to bring the issue of the siege on Jammu and Kashmir to the United Nations represents his 'Anti-India stance'. This is an attempt to silence condemnation of the revocation of Article 370 as a human rights issue, despite the UN repeatedly raising concerns about the Kashmir situation^g. To reposition

[f] <https://www.livemint.com/Politics/UAKPww64sVrdiVSYNkJNEK/What-lies-behind-the-spurt-in-anti-Dalit-crimes-in-India.html>

[g] <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/07/10/kashmir-un-reports-serious-abuses>

the Labour Party approach in this context would also be disrespectful of Labour Party procedure.

Finally, the HFB letter mentions 'Hinduphobia' and draws parallels between this and anti-Semitism. This is deeply worrying given that this idea has been propagated by the BJP and their supporters in India to shut down dissent and criticism of their fascistic measures. The letter compares this 'Hinduphobia' to anti-Semitism, urging the party not to 'make the same error' as they did with the Jewish community in allowing 'racist elements within its own rank unfettered access to megaphone their prejudice'. The only 'evidence' provided of this Hinduphobia is, absurdly, the caste legislation and the Kashmir motion. The terms 'Hinduphobia' and 'anti-Hindu' have, in fact, been fabricated and used to

justify Islamophobia and repression^h by the Hindu right in India – particularly through orchestrated social media trolling campaigns - and clearly do not have traction in a Hindu majority country ruled by a majoritarian Hindu regime. This portrayal of Labour as 'anti-Hindu' and the entirely false equivalence with anti-Semitism has previously been suggested by the UK Hindu Councilⁱ, and reads as trivialising of the very real historical and contemporary issue of anti-Semitism. Moreover, the HFB's use of this rhetoric is emblematic of the close links between the Hindu Forum and the BJP itself, which regularly brands its critics 'anti-

[h] <https://theprint.in/india/delhi-minorities-commission-chief-charged-with-sedition-for-provocative-social-media-post/413112/>

[i] <https://www.thecitizen.in/index.php/en/NewsDetail/index/4/17928/British-Elections-and-the-Hindutva-Campaign>

UK Scholars Condemn Witch-hunt During Lockdown Of Dissenting Anti-CAA Activists

Ninety scholars based in the United Kingdom have jointly issued a statement condemning ongoing crackdown by Modi government on dissenting voices during the Covid19 lockdown. They termed it a 'brutal' witch-hunt by Narendra Modi government against students and activists.

The signatories include scholars from the London School of Economics, Oxford University, Cambridge University and other well-known UK varsities.

The full text of the statement reads as follows:

"We condemn the brutal crackdown on dissent and protest which has accompanied India's Covid-19 lockdown. The Modi government has launched a witch-hunt of students and activists and is charging them under the draconian

Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act (UAPA). Among those charged are Umar Khalid, former JNU student leader, and Meeran Haider and Safoora Zargar of the Jamia Coordinating Committee (JCC) linked to Jamia Millia University in Delhi. Their real 'crime' is that they participated in the massive, peaceful pre-lockdown protests and sit-ins against new laws and procedures that alter the secular basis of Indian citizenship, effectively excluding Muslims and violating India's Constitution. These changes are seen by many in India, across religious and regional divisions, as the first step towards ethnic cleansing. Absurdly, those charged have been accused of instigating the February 'riots' in northeast Delhi, which have been widely recognised as a state-sponsored pogrom against

Muslims.

"In the days after the lockdown, in the face of violence from the police, the JCC had been involved in providing relief measures to daily wage labourers who are among the millions left without food or money under India's unplanned lockdown.

"Safoora Zargar is pregnant and therefore vulnerable to Covid-19. Shockingly, she has been incarcerated in Delhi's overcrowded Tihar Jail.

"We support the internet campaign by students and academics across India to protest against these fabricated charges and urge the Indian government to immediately drop charges against Zargar, Haider, Shifa Ur Rehman, and Khalid."

(Reproduced from The Wire)

national'— most recently the Chair of the Delhi government's own Minorities Commission was charged with Sedition and 'promoting enmity between different groups on grounds of religion' for saying that Muslims in India were being persecuted^j. As explored above, the letter also exemplifies how the notion of Hindu-phobia is used to deny the existence of, and silence protest against, caste-based discrimination in the UK.

In a second letter to you the HFB make a further disturbing claim that, in their own words, 'Pakistan Occupied Kashmir was and is an integral part of India, of that there is no doubt'. Not only is this an act of war-mongering against Pakistan, which like India is a nuclear armed state, it is an assertion of the idea of Akhand Bharat or undivided India, which will include Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka and is one of the key expansionist aims of the RSS.


We understand that recently you also met with the executive team of Labour Friends of India (LFIN), in a similar vein of rebuilding trust within the Indian community^k. Rajesh Agrawal, current Chair of LFIN and Deputy Mayor of London, is a staunch and explicit sympathiser with the RSS, and attends official events of its UK wing, HSS-UK^l. He has been pictured^m attending an event with Manoj Ladwa, a member of the HSS and former Communications Director for the 2014 'Narendra

Modi for Prime Minister' campaignⁿ. (Notably, Ladwa is also a founder member and first President of National Hindu Students Forum UK^o, further demonstrating the close links between many UK-based Hindu-right organisations and their

[n] <https://www.newsclick.in/Manoj-Ladwa-Modi-Loves>

[o] <http://manojladwa.com/about-manoj-ladwa/>

counterparts in India.)

Please acknowledge our concerns about your relationship with the HFB and other Hindu-Right organisations. We urge you to represent the majority within the Indian diaspora who do not align themselves with the ongoing fascism of the Modi regime and their allies in Britain. 

Facilitating the Corporate Plunder of Kashmir Under Cover of Covid19

An online public meeting on 'Silencing the truth-tellers: Kashmir under occupation in the time of Covid-19' organised by South Asia Solidarity Group on 9 May highlighted the current situation in Kashmir, and in particular the intensified repression and the plunder and extraction of resources from Kashmir by corporate capital which is being facilitated by the abrogation of Article 370 and the new Domicile laws, and is taking place under cover of the Covid-19 pandemic. Talks by Kashmiri lawyer and writer Mirza Saaib Bég, Arshie Qureshi of the Kashmir Women's Collective and Dr Mehroosh Tak of the Kashmir Solidarity Movement provided insights into how these processes are taking place. The speakers' contributions can be viewed here.

The people of Kashmir are being subjected to particularly lethal risks from Covid-19 as a result of the expanded military presence and the communications lockdown since Article 370 was abrogated in August 2019. A few days before the webinar, mobile phone connections were once again snapped in the valley, further worsening conditions for a population under siege.

Meanwhile, the abrogation of Article 370 has ushered in a

new phase of Israeli-style settler-colonialism in Kashmir which is even now taking shape, in particular through the new Domicile laws being rushed through, which have the potential to drastically alter both the demography as well as access to the state's resources, as well as introducing requirements for existing citizens which have been compared to the NRC

And the Modi government is using the Covid-19 lockdown as a pretext to intensify repression and surveillance and silence those who bear witness to the lived realities in the Kashmir Valley. Emblematic of this are the charges brought against renowned Kashmiri photojournalist Masrat Zahra under the draconian Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act 1967 (UAPA) on April 20. This was in relation to a nineteen-month old photograph, the property of Getty Images. Also on April 20, the Jammu and Kashmir police filed a FIR against Peerzada Ashiq, the Hindu newspaper's Kashmir correspondent, accusing him of reporting 'fake news'. This was done instead of following the usual practice of asking the newspaper to issue a clarification. On April 21, the Jammu and Kashmir police charged author and journalist Gowhar Geelani of 'glorifying

[j] <https://theprint.in/india/delhi-minorities-commission-chief-charged-with-sedition-for-provocative-social-media-post/413112/>

[k] <https://labourlist.org/2020/04/keir-starmer-repositions-labour-on-kashmiri-conflict/>

[l] <http://hssuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/PRESS-RELEASE-DEPUTY-MAYOR-OF-LONDON-ATTENDS-BREAKFAST-MEETING.pdf>

[m] <https://twitter.com/RajeshAgrawal/status/1036330788042797058>

terrorism' and indulging in activities 'prejudicial to the sovereignty and integrity of India'. The previous day he had written in support of Masrat and Peerzada. The persecution of journalists continues: most recently the editor of the Kashmir Walla Fahad Shah was questioned by police and accused of 'maligning' their reputation for reporting the damaging of at least fifteen homes, rendering them uninhabitable during the pandemic, and allegations of loot against government forces by local residents, in the aftermath of the Nawakadal gunfight.

During the online meeting, Mirza Saaib Bég discussed the legislative changes which have taken place since the Covid lockdown, the Modi government's authoritarian opportunism and its dramatic economic and political consequences in Kashmir. He pointed out that passing the Domicile Law right now during the Covid-19 lockdown was a strategic decision by the Modi government as it has meant that mass protest against it has been impossible. He explained that the changes will allow not only demographic changes but mining and corporate plunder of Kashmir. For the first time land and mining rights in Kashmir have been given to Indian citizens and companies. Auctions of mining rights have already happened and 100% of leases went to non-Kashmiris – in fact, auctions were deliberately held online to exclude Kashmiris who are still facing an internet shutdown. This mining will have a massively destructive impact on Kashmir's ecology. He argued that conscientious Indians must refuse to participate in these processes.

Arshie Qureshi, a researcher and women's human rights defender from Kashmir who works closely with women victim-survivors of domestic violence is a member of


Kashmir Women's Collective, which is a women's rights and advocacy group actively working against gender-based violence in the valley. Due to the cutting of phone networks, she was unable to directly address the meeting, underlining further the 'silencing' of Kashmiri voices by the Indian state. However she sent a prerecorded video of her talk. She highlighted that women's rights cannot be understood in isolation from human rights in Kashmir despite the spurious and completely discredited claims of the Modi government to be acting on behalf of Kashmiri women in revoking Article 370. As just one example, the UAPA charges against photojournalist Masrat Zahra have prevented her from telling women's stories which would not otherwise be told. She explained that the Indian government's counterinsurgency approach to Covid-19 in Kashmir throws aside human rights. The mobile phone blockade has functioned as a collective punishment, denying people access to healthcare and denying support to women facing domestic violence in a context where only 1% of Kashmiris or less have a fixed landline.

Dr Mehroosh Tak, an economist specializing in agricultural policies and food systems and co-founder of the Kashmir Solidarity Movement, pointed out that there are more than fifteen 'Red Zones' for Covid-19 in Srinagar at the moment. These are arbitrarily declared by Army to justify cordoning off localities and suppressing protests. She also explained how the current takeover of Kashmiri financial institutions will facilitate distress sales from Kashmiri businesses and farmers to Indian corporates. Many in Kashmir depend on forest land which is being undermined through the abrogation of Article 370. Access to

food is being threatened and food insecurity is rising, exacerbated by Covid-19. However, international humanitarian relief to Kashmir is blocked as long as it is seen as a bilateral issue. Dr Tak also noted that while close economic ties between the UK and India are deterring the UK from taking a stand on Kashmir, the intensive lobbying by the Hindutva right in the UK has also played a huge role in determining policy on Kashmir, as well as blocking caste discrimination legislation in the UK.

Fund Raisers for Delhi Riot Victims and Stranded Migrant Workers:

South Asia Solidarity Group has held two fundraisers via Instagram Live since the start of the UK lockdown. The first event, which took place on 25th March, raised funds for the survivors of the February Delhi pogrom which left thousands homeless. This event featured a diverse line-up of musicians and poets including British spoken word poet Shareefa Energy, Toronto-based electronic duo LAL, Scottish singer-songwriter Kapil Seshasayee, Carnatic vocalist Janani Sridharan, and others. The funds raised were donated directly to the relief efforts.

The second event took place one month later on 25th April, and the funds raised were donated to the relief funds for migrant workers and daily-wage labourers in India that have been hit especially hard by the lockdown. This event featured a wide variety of poets, writers, musicians and speakers, including Kenyan poet Wangui Wa Goro, writer Nimesh Shukla, opera singer Nadine Benjamin and others. The funds raised were donated directly to the AICCTU relief initiatives. 

Hari Vasudevan



Eminent historian Hari Vasudevan succumbed to Covid-19 in Kolkata. He was 68.

Vasudevan was a scholar of European and Russian history and politics. In 1995, he played an invaluable part in visiting Russia and securing documents on the Comintern from the newly opened Soviet archives on Indo-Russian

Relations : 1917-1947. He was especially dedicated to archiving and making available the documents pertaining to Indian revolutionaries in the Soviet Union, a task he did with his colleagues Purabi Roy and Sobhanlal Datta Gupta, in the teeth of opposition from the "official" Left establishment in Kolkata in times of Left Front rule.

In a piece written for NewsClick on 22 April 2020, he wrote of the Covid-19 pandemic and migrant workers' hunger and distress: "The problem of the migrant's hunger may, correctly, easily be put down to an errant state allowing want against a background of abundance, a situation so brilliantly depicted in Satyajit Ray's *Ashani Sanket* (*Distant Thunder* (1973)), or to the misadventure of ignorant informal

labour that is a victim of political machinations. But, let us make no mistake about both. In today's India, they are the outcome of something that reveals a terrifying truth: a social innocence about genuine starvation and want that limits public capacity to make demands of the state; insensitivity to the message in the Malayalam language hit film *Ustad Hotel* (2012) that relish for food is empty if it ignores the plight of those unable to savour it. This is an appalling comment on where India's Republic has arrived, when much of its original project was to deal with these very problems.

Liberation pays its respects to Hari Vasudevan, and joins his family, friends and progressive people everywhere, in mourning his untimely loss.

Comrade Narender Kumar

Comrade Narender Kumar, 47, passed away on 17 May 2020 after a sudden heart attack in Delhi. He was a member of state committee of the party in Delhi. He has been suffering from a serious kidney ailment and undergoing dialysis regularly but this shock was never expected.

Comrade Narender was an extremely committed member, cultural activist and an advocate who unfailingly worked for the people. His untimely loss is a huge irreparable blow to the party in

Delhi. He was a member of Nishant Natya Manch during 90s. He joined CPIML around 2000 and became associated with party's local work in North-West Delhi areas. He was always sought by all in Delhi party for his unfailing help, legal and beyond, whenever there was some incident of repression.

His body was wrapped in Party's red flag and floral tributes were offered by Delhi State Secretary Ravi Rai and Shrikant on behalf of the party before he was taken for cremation on 18th. A memorial meeting was organized at Delhi state office in Jahangirpuri on 20 May.

Red Salute Comrade Narender!



Comrade Suhail Akhtar

Comrade Suhail Akhtar, a long-standing communist lawyer and human rights campaigner and a member of the Arwal District Committee of the CPIML passed away in the evening of 25 May. He was battling cancer for quite some time. Following the conviction of Comrade Shah Chand and

13 other comrades under the draconian TADA in 2003, Comrade Suhail played an important role in building up a campaign for their release. This laid the foundation for the subsequent emergence of the *Insaf Manch* as a fighting platform against feudal-communal violence and state repression in the district. The Central Committee and Bihar State Committee of CPIML joined the comrades of Arwal to mourn the passing of Comrade Suhail Akhtar and extend condolences to his family and friends.

Red Salute Comrade Suhail Akhtar!



Hunger Strike by CPIML Leader BN Singh Incarcerated in Medini Nagar, Jharkhand

Comrade BN Singh was on fast unto death since 13 May inside Medininagar Central Jail in Jharkhand where he has been incarcerated for more than 16 years. He was attacked by some inmates led by a senior prison warder. Another CPIML activist Shrawan Vishwakarma, who also is facing incarceration in same jail, sat on fast with him. The hunger strike continued till 18 May when the jail administration begun feeling pressure of this protest and action was taken against the attackers. While comrade BN Singh was on fast inside the jail, his comrades in Palamou district along with all left parties came out to speak up on the issue and organized a one day protest at the district headquarters. This was attended by a range of left and democratic forces who demanded action against the erring jail authorities.

Comrade BN Singh was transferred to this jail from another jail in last March. Ever since he has been vocal against various irregularities and injustices inside the jail. This became provocation enough for the corrupt administration to indirectly organize an attack on him with the help of some criminal elements lodged in there.

BN Singh has said that he will continue to raise the issue of justice and inhuman conditions for the inmates and other jail reforms. He has informed the jail administration and state government about many problems which inmates genuinely deserve to be addressed. He has suggested for the installation of one phone for every 100 inmates and free phone calls. He also raised the important question of Parole which should not be left in the hands of few bureaucrats to take arbitrary decisions.

Three CPIML leaders have been incarcerated in this jail. Pradip Vishwakarma and Shrawan Vishwakarma were the district committee members of Palamou. They also tried to get parole to attend the marriage of their children which was denied quite unjustifiably. Many inmates are facing such problems and disquiet is brewing among them against the administration.

These three CPIML leaders have been in jail for more than 16 years and by going with the usual jail norms they would have been release by now, but they are denied even very short paroles to attend to children's marriage. The district administration in this matter is actually violating Supreme Court of India's recommendations.

BN Singh has also raised the issue of the release of prisoners who have completed their full jail term and not been released only due to jail administration's callousness. Many senior citizens have been forced to live in inhuman jail conditions in their old age. There is another order by SC that lifers who have completed fourteen years should be set free on the basis of their good conduct. State government is responsible to take decision in such cases, but last many governments in Jharkhand have not shown any willingness to address such cases which will also decrease the overcrowding inside jails.

It is the power of jail authorities to give a report of good conduct. But where jail administration has to face protests against their irregularities and corruptions, it is difficult for honest inmates to get a 'good conduct' report! This is a major reason that after been incarcerated on false charges these CPIML leaders have not been released even after years. But BN Singh and his comrades are determined to continue their fight for justice wherever they are, inside or outside jail, irrespective of whatever will be the repercussions!

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NAXALBARI 53 

On the occasion of the 53rd anniversary
Of the historic Naxalbari movement

WE CHERISH THE GLORIOUS LEGACY OF MARTYRS

WE PLEDGE TO STAND WITH THE PEOPLE



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