REPRESENTATION OF THE MIGRANT WORKERS AT THE TIME OF PANDEMIC: VULNERABILITY AND COUNTERING OF EXPERIENCES ON NEW MEDIA

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Abstract

The paper seeks to understand visual representation and the 'othering' of migrant workers in the time of pandemic. Digital technologies have made visibility expansive and at the same time, created spaces of contention for people to express their views in multimodal forms. Internal/ urban migrants refer to a floating population that comes to the cities in search for work. The plight of the migrant workers after the announcement of lockdown in India caused indignation among people witnessing the visuals who, in turn, tried to raise consciousness by employing various protest methods, both online and offline. The representation of migrant workers is explored at audio-visual forms, the imprint it left on the individual and community psyche, the resemblance, connotation and juxtaposition with other visuals when they had to return to their hometown with lockdown and no government (state/central) aids. The differential treatment regarding safety measures and resources given to people exposed the class divide existent within the country. The article seeks to explore the meaning making of injustice symbols regarding the migrant workers during the lockdown and their iconic significance with the new modes of protest repertoires on behalf and by the migrant worker.

Keywords: migrant workers, lockdown, representation, iconic significance, injustice symbols.

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Introduction: Prologue to the Pandemic

In 1947, Albert Camus published a novel about a contagious virus that transmits uncontrollably from animals to humans and then from citizen to citizen. The novel opens in the fictional town of Oran which like any other 'ordinary' modern city is mechanical, but the façade of normalcy is soon ruptured by an unforeseen epidemic which results in citywide panic and chaos, finally wiping out half of Oran's population before disappearing after more than a year. Camus' *The Plague* (*La Peste*) is not very unique in the sense that it had its precedent in various Western literatures dealing with the history of plague ranging from the medieval Black Death to the Great Plague of London (1665) to colonial accounts of the 18th- and 19th-century plagues that annihilated China's eastern seaboard or the deadly Spanish Flu of 1918. Camus, however, never talked of any particular plague or referred to any historical event per se. He rather philosophised the modern life we are surviving through as a plague, thereby attempting to expose our own vulnerability/frailty in the face of a mere microorganism and thus shaking the very foundation of our anthropocentric attitude. Evidently, in the novel, the people of Oran 'otherise' the plague as something non-modern and something that has vanished from Europe and even discards its possibility by boasting of their medical advancement. Even as the plague killed thousands of citizens, the rest kept convincing themselves that they would not be affected by it. However, at the end when the pestilence finally disappears and the people gather to celebrate the return of normalcy, the protagonist Dr. Rieux remembers 'that such joy is always imperilled.'

> He knew what those jubilant crowds did not know but could have learned from books: that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and the enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city. (254)

This novel still seems relevant in our present time. Camus tried to point out a fundamental aspect of human nature, that humankind is wilfully oblivious of its own frailty and somehow gives in to the recurring patterns of death time and again. Also, as the

plague/epidemic/pandemic gives way to panic, naturally resulting in chaos and breakdown of law and order, legal institutions use the pandemic as a pretext, enforcing stricter rules to apparently 'contain' the situation. This brings us to the first section of our discussion, namely the rise of the recent pandemic COVID-19 and the structuring of our institutional and the general responses as well as the lived experiences of the directly affected (namely the urban migrants) during these uncertain times.

When the first wave of COVID-19 hit the world a year back, it elicited multiple responses from the real as well as virtual public sphere. However, notwithstanding its name, this virus was novel in the sense that probably for the first time the entire humankind was faced with the threat of a mass extinction and we started searching desperately for answers regarding what hit us and how to hit back. In the beginning of the second chapter of his book *Pandemic* (titled "Why are we tired all the time?"), Žižek denotes two opposite categories created by the Coronavirus epidemic, namely 'those, like medical staff and carers, who are overworked to the point of exhaustion, and those who have nothing to do since they are forcibly or voluntarily confined to their homes'' (Žižek 2020). During the first wave, as the world was confronting a common faceless enemy, health professionals worked tirelessly to control the escalating cases, while those confined to the private sphere (mostly the middle class) were going insane over earning their long-yearned vacations accidentally and were busy innovating ways to stay 'in-touch' with one another despite the corporeal distancing. And thus, in order to keep them sane, productive and un-alienated, the netizens immersed themselves in 'Dalgona coffee' and other viral cooking recipes, various types of online challenges, art therapy, etc. To ensure productivity and safe isolation the capitalist organisations too allowed work from home, and educational institutions introduced online classes via Google Meet, Zoom, etc. In short, the entire world was struggling to come to terms with the 'new normal', perhaps with a hope of reverting to the 'old normal' someday.

Apart from these two categories, in India there exists a third major category of people who cannot afford to stay quarantined deliberating on the situation or remain 'productive' from their homes, namely, the migrant workers whose contribution to the Indian urban economy remains very crucial despite their economic vulnerability. However, when the Indian government decided to impose a total lockdown after the World Health Organisation's declaration of the outbreak as a public health emergency on 30 January 2020, this sudden

suspension of all economic activities proved catastrophic for these urban poor—daily wagers and manual labourers, who constitute a majority of our population. With the spread of the virus these daily/monthly wagers who either 'intrude' from the public sphere into the private sphere (maids, nurses, nannies, cooks, drivers, security guards, sanitation workers) or work in factories, construction sites, eateries, etc., became instant subjects of suspicion—carriers of the deadly 'disease', as they supposedly lacked 'awareness' or willingness to observe safety protocols. These invisible hands that work in the cities, its households and factories, living in the slums, were always in the middle-class imagination, the 'dens' where 'crime', 'perversion' and 'germs' proliferate. These were always the 'aberrations', areas we covered up when foreign dignitaries came or during the Commonwealth games. It was forgotten that it is such 'aberrations' that have allowed us to propel our 'growth' story. These 'aberrations' do not have water and sanitation, they do not have the square feet necessary for physical distancing and they do not have the luxury of working from home. These are the pockets that in the middle-class psyche became the spots where the virus also allegedly festers. Ramachadra Guha (1995) through his extensive research has shown how degradation of natural resources by the industries and corporates, and dispossession of people dependent on the ecosystem of villages, pushes them to migrate to the urban centres in search of livelihood and forces them to live on a pittance, providing cheap labour and turning them into ecological refugees.

In March, when the lockdown was announced within a few hours, it created commotion among people, especially the migrant workers deciding to walk long hours to reach their hometown (Hebbar 2020; BBC 2020). People who were in the confines of their houses stayed glued to the screen gobbling up the pandemic-related information. The expansion of communication technologies led people from around the world to witness visuals of events after the lockdown in India. The new media platform indicates a variety of changes with regard to the speed of accessibility, mobility, appearance of content and content reception and production. The increase of broadband has resulted in the transfer of larger amounts of data at an increased speed. There is convergence of various media platforms like the mainstream media (both government and private), social media sites and other platforms where various audio-visual content is shared at a rapid pace and can be viewed by anyone from anywhere at any time. What stood out is a vast repertoire of visuals of migrant workers

who were left stranded across cities and had to walk long distances to reach their homes. Their precariousness was captured by the reporters and civil society activists who meticulously documented the perilous journey of the migrant workers back to their homes.

Methodology and Methods

The study uses social semiotics in the analysis of visuals of migrant workers. The visuals circulated online are witnessed by a wider audience. The visuals are situated within the socio-cultural context and hence the signs in the visuals are related to the current situation. Visuals reflect the everyday life of people and therefore, the object of analysis becomes audio-visuals of the migrant workers, the narrative given by them and various protest methods used by the concerned citizens. The integration of media in our everyday life is subtly shaping our ways of perception as Macluhan (1964) aptly opines; media becomes the 'extension of man'. The visuals are now able to enter the perception of people reconfiguring the collective imagination. However, networking also results in the fluidities of transnational communities and people showing solidarity by coming together. Some human experiences are best represented visually that leaves an imprint in the collective imagination of people. Critical visual methodology reflects the visuals in terms of cultural significance and is aware of both the internal and the external messages. All visuals like images and audio-visuals are results of human actions that are embedded within social relations. Visuals create multiple dimensions which are analysed in the representation. There is the representation of the experiences of the pandemic on institutional level as well as the collective and personal narratives by the migrant workers. Visuals enter our memories through witnessing and its constant citation and the coming of new media platforms also aid in the culture of sharing. The visuals selected are based on certain common visual motifs that are found in the images and related to the larger frames of reference, for example, the walking of the migrant workers, the vulnerability expressed through emotions and the common protest methods used online after the lockdown when physical mobilisation of people was curtailed. The next section discusses the representation of some of the visuals of the migrant workers with respect to representation of the themes generated.

Iconic Visuals of Migrant Workers

As the country went into a literal lockdown, these workers, who had migrated to bigger cities in search of job opportunities, lost their jobs and income and had no choice but to return home. This resulted in an unforeseen wave of internal migration reminiscent of the 1947 Partition. As millions of migrant workers started moving from major cities towards rural regions in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal, Odisha, Chhattisgarh, Kerala, the North East, etc., we witnessed the heart-rending images of this modern day 'Kafila' of migrant workers heading for their faraway 'homes' on foot, tractors, etc. or remaining stranded near the district and state borders, bus stands and railway stations or without food, rest or money; or certain disturbing images/videos like stale chapatis lying on the railway tracks belonging to the migrant labourers run over by a goods train (near Aurangabad), a migrant mother dragging her exhausted child on her luggage or of the toddler hovering over his mother's corpse in the railway station, circulated via newspapers and social media, triggering a nationwide rage, sympathy, panic and fear simultaneously.

The advent of the mobile phone has enabled common people to click photos or record videos in real time and share them widely resulting in uncoupling of space and time, providing the experience of despatialised simultaneity (Thompson 1995). The perturbing images of migrants on the move not only shocked people, but also provoked them into actions as the city was shut down suddenly leaving the migrant workers without any access to state or government aid. It also revealed the fragile nature of the society where the city invisibilised the presence of these migrant workers performing precarious work on the daily, but during the time of pandemic it all became visibilised due to lack of resources and were still discarded as unwanted. There is a video of a reporter where a boy is seen crying as complete lockdown restricted his mobility and travelling home was the only option given (Gill 2020). Hence, he experienced harassment from the police for walking on the street. Crying and fear are primal emotions, and the *punctum*[1] of the picture is of a migrant boy

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[1] 'Punctum' belongs to the uncoded, that which cannot be understood in the socio-cultural framework but is totally outside it. Ranciere (2009) critiqued Bathes when he relates Barthes picture with the nostalgia of the living that is now dead, the living person who was captured in the photographs before death. In this context, it is the contradiction and primal emotions of alienation and being left alone for survival that caught people's attention. Barthes suggested that Punctumn is an element that is capable of inflicting wound and piercing someone when looking at the images.

caught in a city at the time of the pandemic. More than the primal emotion it was the juxtaposition of the mega city that represents development and abundance of consumerism and on the contrary, the existence and helplessness of a child labourer caught during the pandemic. The distraught faces of the migrant workers walking against the backdrop of skyscrapers bears a stark resemblance to the graded citizenship and differential treatment where some sections of the population are better equipped in handling the virus than the economically downtrodden. The pandemic was also a time when the existing layers of exclusion, the existing fissures got further exacerbated. If one adds another layer to the migrants and makes it Muslim migrants, then the same social media images had a role to play in making their life more vulnerable. The concocted 'super-spreader' visuals were an exceptional low when the representation of the humanitarian tragedy took a communal colour. Muslim vendors were not allowed to enter villages and there were visible signs of discrimination.

Like death, Coronavirus too is now perceived as a great equaliser, but underneath this charade of equity this epidemic also exposed the invisible borders existent within our society. Moreover, the differential treatment within the public sphere, especially in sectors like healthcare, education, transport also clearly indicated the state sovereignty's role in categorising and prioritising people according to their utility/significance (cataloguing them into *bios* and *bare*, to use Agamben's terms (Agamben 1998). This discriminatory attitude of inclusion, exclusion and supervising bodies was glaringly evident during the first lockdown when the government imposed restrictions upon human movement. At around the same time when inter-state transportation was being shut down leaving the labourers stranded, huddled together without any social distancing or lack of proper amenities and hygiene, Indians living abroad were provided PPE kits and transported back to the country by the Central Government. Also, many workers died not of the deadly virus but of hunger, physical exhaustion and of course the state government's negligence. Evidently, one can observe a clear-cut divide between the government's attitude towards the privileged and disenfranchised bodies, as well as a division within the body politic regarding the migrant workers. This probably roused many social media users to express their outrage via digital platforms, comparing the present situation with the mass dislocation during the Partition. These visuals are affective in nature and invite indignation from the people with an intensity

to move them. Clearly, vulnerability during the first wave of pandemic was distributed unequally where some categories of people were prone to stereotypes along with being devoid of the resources required to sustain a liveable life.

Walking as a Pathological Imposition

The hasty solution of imposing lockdown (without proper planning or policy making) put everyone into a state of frenzy. Epidemics often give rise to heroes and villains where the floating and travelling population is considered the cause of threat. Conflict ensued when the outsiders who were flocking to the hinterlands and rural areas were considered carriers of diseases, creating an insider and outsider dichotomy. The constant streaming of information, misinformation and rumours through digital platforms not only resulted in generation of fear but also resulted in policing of bodies where the most vulnerable population had to bear apathy and hatred from the state (as well as people).

An image grabbed the attention of people when a hoard of migrant workers returning to Uttar Pradesh was sprayed with disinfectants at a bus stand in Bareilly. The disinfectants were spread using a hosepipe by two sanitation workers who wore protective gear to safeguard themselves. There was an order by the district magistrate of Bareilly against the officials to check if chemicals have been used but the spraying of disinfectants on the workers, introducing further debates about the use of chemicals on human worker (Rashid 2020). The representation shows that the workers could be treated without adhering to the ethics of human rights, a situation where their rights are violated or ignored especially when they are perceived as a threat/invasion with the virus. These images make a moral claim to be recognised as the distinction between the body of the migrant workers and the virus is eliminated. These images are also in contrast with the images of '*thaali*' banging and the migrants carrying their luggage in the streets that showed the extent that has been allowed to fester in the name of neoliberalism, a distance that could no longer stayed hidden as the viral waves crashed on our shores.

It is noted that humans have been sprayed upon whenever there has been a rise in biomedical control. In the United States, DDT, a pesticide, was used across neighbourhoods for the cure of malaria and polio which was later found to be detrimental for the people and considered unethical. In the Vietnam War, toxic chemicals were sprayed on crops and large areas of

Vietnam and Laos by American soldiers which affected people on an intergenerational basis. Modernisation results in biocontrol of the population where cleanliness and eradication of disease has resulted in the elimination or segregation of certain sections of people who have been associated with the disease. Hence, the migrant workers were sprayed; this was carried out by the government authority as their bodies personified the virus and were considered to be carriers of the disease. Agamben (1998) and later Mbembe (2019) stated this about citizens and the disqualified unworthy and excluded (*zoe*, bare life) subject, in order to protect the privileged people. Death and sufferings are normalised where dignified life is subjugated with the commodification of the labour of the migrant workers and their life is subjugated to the power of death and bordering practices of nationalism which is based on selective hierarchisation and exclusion of people from access to social insurances.

As expected, the children and the elderly became the most vulnerable during this perilous journey of the migrant workers as they had to be carried–by their relatively younger family members. In that sense, walking is also a privilege for the able-bodied people and the children and the aged became doubly vulnerable as there was a mass exodus of families with anxiety regarding occupation and getting back their jobs. There are many images that show the children being carried by their parents or relatives. In some places, the child has been captured walking and limping because of sheer exhaustion and pain endured by walking barefoot. These images can be related to the Syrian child Marwan, who was trudging along the desert, a few steps behind his family. He held his essentials but his posture and walk and later the whole line of people provided insight into the precarious conditions in which children are suffering. The children either followed their parents or were carried, and from time to time took rest by drinking water or sleeping on the platform or sidewalk, waiting for any kind of transportation.
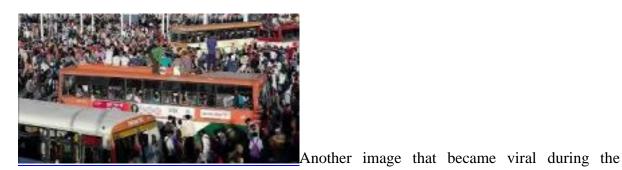
The images bore resemblance to the famous 'Migrant Mother' shot by Dorothea Lange, which shows a mother sitting with her two children facing away from the camera. It was taken in 1930, where she was in a camp that provided shelter to the dispossessed and unemployed people in America, reflecting pain, fortitude, suffering and poverty. The name of the woman was not known and her picture remains suspended in time showing the vacuity of suffering and precarious life that many continue to suffer because of dispossession and migration (Curtis 1986; Caldwell 2016).

In both the pictures of the migrant father and the migrant mother, the bleak look with uncertainty and the tensed muscles on their faces reflects their class and anxiety. The migrant mother is sitting whereas the father has undertaken a long enduring journey to reach the safety of his hometown with his family. The frontal image capturing the face of the father carrying his children reduces the distance between the camera and the person. The distance reduces between the person gazing back and also those who are witnessing the scene, making them inhabit the same space of the reporter and being in close proximity with the person in the image.[2] The mass movement of people in difficult situations, presented a highly chaotic and potentially unstable situation from the view of law and order.;The vulnerability of the elderly and the young is particularly pronounced during such times. During the lockdown and the consequent displacement of workers, the adults literally carried their families on their shoulders without any immediate aid from the government. The family has always been associated with a closely knit group and although the definition of family may have changed but in the age of rapid modernisation and precarity, family becomes the means to hold on to

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[2] Gazing defines power relation where the earlier European paintings often had women facing away for the people to gaze at the pictures. The images of Abu Gharib hide the faces of the detainees or have them covered with a black cloth so as to hide their faces and make them anonymous so that there is no identification with the people (Reinherdt 2007). The hurricane Katrina that devastated in New Orleans is captured through Ariel photographs where people do not appear. At the same, it was a way to shirk responsibility with pictures of white people saving the local people who were predominantly black came out more in the Hurricane Katrina photographs (Giudici 2008).

dear ones. Without infrastructural care, the vulnerable members become dependent on the family to survive. Also, the carrying of luggage and bags show the mass level of displacement from the place of livelihood that in turn suggests their uprootedness from their home place and settling in the city in search of occupation, which further severs them from the community where they grew up or had bonding and security that the city did not provide. Many of them were contractual workers working in the city. The presence of luggage and family members proved the indefinite nature of lockdown and lack of assurance they received from any institution.

Another image that became viral during the pandemic was of the overcrowded tractors, buses, trucks and trains, reminiscent of the mass exodus during the partition of India in 1947. The obsessive desire to form a new nation by dividing India on ostensibly religious lines resulted not only in frequent communal bloodbaths but also compelled people to desert their ancestral place in waves and take refuge in some relatively 'safer' alien land amidst their unfamiliar coreligionists. This phenomenon of minorities gradually becoming redundant in their own familial spaces can also be witnessed during the outbreak of the pandemic where the indispensable migrant workers suddenly turned into undesirable bodies within the urban space. Much akin to the disenfranchised masses displaced by Partition, the economic and socio-political insecurities destabilised these toiling masses both socially and psychologically, driving them out of the cities.

At the same time, workers without their identity cards who had come from other states realised that they were eliminated from the Public Distribution System where food was given and medical facilities. Hence, the proof of their identity and homelessness is another aspect that became a bone of contention in accessing resources (Shahare 2021). Moreover, the apathetic attitude of the government as reflected in its lack of framing any proper policy for

the skilled, semi-skilled labourers and the urban poor before the announcement of the lockdown can be perceived as a symbolic violence where there is no articulation for the safety and needs of the people.[3] The impromptu solution of a total lockdown was given legitimacy when the government announced it without adequate preparation. The dominant threat was the virus and any decision taken for the safety of the privileged population was considered normal even though it did not benefit a particular section of the people. Quarantining took precedence over the livelihood and safety of the migrant workers who could not afford self-quarantine. The buses, trucks and railway stations filled with people in desperate need of going home hoping for a sense of safety displays a stark resemblance with the visuals of Partition refugees. The streets, highways and other transportations that are generally considered to be the symbols of connectivity and development became a symbol of separation for the workers from the city during the pandemic. Walking in an uncertain time has long been associated with the precarious situation of people in slavery, partition, natural disaster and other unfortunate events in human history. Walking is considered a sign of dispossession as the immigrants are uprooted from their homes and have to search for new places for settlement. Hence, mobility becomes pathological nomadism when carried out on foot in the time of COVID-19.

Vulnerability in Crying

Alexander and Bertmanski (2012) opined that the role of the iconicity[4] plays an important role in structuring our perceptions in order to retain understanding and remember events. The iconic power turns visuals into an objective power of history. The helplessness shown on the faces of migrant workers has similarities with the historically displaced people or people caught in the midst of violence and riots.

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[3] The term was used by Pierre Bourdieu to understand the dominant culture and how school systems normalised the culture and those who did not have the means to the dominant culture where considered failing. Hence, it is the arbitrary rules and behaviours of the dominant culture that are normalised with legitimacy and power imposed on those who do not share the symbols of the dominant culture (Lakomski 2014).

[4] Icons convey unequivocal straightforwardness and immediacy that runs counter to the enigmatic ambivalence that is the hallmark of pictorial art. Icons trigger strong emotions be it attractive or impulsive or triumphant (Alexande & Bartmański 2012: 247). According to Durkheim [1912(1995)], icons can be both sacred and devilishly disruptive, for example, the shock photographs. The icons fuse the referents with the emotions. Here, it is with reference to the injustice symbols that have become iconic as they have instilled shock in people witnessing the plight of the migrant workers.

Ram Pukar Pandit's image became viral when he was seen talking over the phone (The Hindu 2020). His face is contorted as he could be seen crying after he got the news of the passing of his one-year-old son. He begged the Delhi police for aid but reached his native village in Bihar only after three days. The picture bears resemblance with the man who was crying for his safety during the 2002 Gujarat riots. Both these images depict the helplessness of these men tempo-spatially separated yet sharing the same vulnerability and helplessness. Similar to the man crying for his safety during the Gujarat riots, Ram Pukar Pandit too cried to return home to his family but failed to find any means to do so. Crying is a common emotion and both these images are affective in nature; this makes people identify with the primal emotions of fear and loss. The visual grammar of suffering bodies produces meaningful discourses of suffering through certain representational modes. It develops an affective sociality and political response in contemporary public life, giving a voice to those who have suffered.

In some of the visuals, the migrant workers or their family members are also seen crying. There were many migrants who were exhausted due to long stretches of walking. There were many workers who passed away during their journey. The mourning by their family members have been captured and circulated. Mourning is a strong emotion for the dead and public mourning shows the loss suffered by people due to their precarious situation and dispossession of their livelihood and place of living at the time of pandemic.[5] These migrant workers are mostly contractual without any safety net covering their job loss, and the city abandoned them in the name of their safety and isolation. Hence, mourning became a ubiquitous symbol as quite a few stranded people ended up taking of lives, and the image of their family members mourning were taken by reporters. Hypervigilance and threat of the virus creates anxiety in a society with graded inequality based on caste, class and gender

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[5] Mourning has been a source of resistance for Kashmir women who have lost their family members due to the military rule. At the time of pandemic, the ritual of mourning that took place every year for the disappeared people in Kashmir was carried out on the virtual platform. In the same manner, Babis (2020) spoke about the digital mourning by the Filipino immigrants in Isreal through his ethnographic study both offline and online.

along with the precarious nature of the economy. Unfortunately, the death of nearly a thousand migrant workers during the lockdown due to physical and emotional agony have economically and psychologically devastated their families as well.

New Modes of Protest Repertoires

Solidarity and connection is required among people at a time when everyone becomes an object of suspicion due to irrational fear taking over and isolating them. To counter the fear there have been open discussions about the state of migrant workers and suffering that they have undergone. The personal narratives provided by the migrant workers about their struggles of walking and not finding livelihood proliferated widely on new media. As the pandemic forced people to go into isolation, affective networking brought people with shared intensities on the plight of the migrant workers together to raise consciousness about injustice. Ranciere opined with regard to photographs for humanitarian aid that these photographs come within cultural and social context. In this context, the cartoons and the images of the migrant workers comes with a discourse of injustice and apathy of the government.

The term social distancing was debated as the society is made of social relations that acknowledge the interconnectedness of people and sharing of vulnerability. Citizenship has been defined by consumer rights to aid the market economy in a neoliberal age, leaving a large section of population devoid of welfarism. During the pandemic, large sections of people were invited and virtual platforms became a space for protest; it is through the sharing of information, images and videos that people came out on the streets in aid of the migrant workers. The internet becomes a space where people can consciously choose to be autonomous agents and endorsing/sharing political content is a way of establishing autonomy. The collision of conflicting viewpoints and the difficulty of establishing news from fake news not only undermines social relations during crisis but also produces a certain kind of moral shock[6]. These media events make a moral claim to be recognised. The repeated discussions regarding the plight of the migrant workers can create affective intensity capable of throwing the whole discourse in favour of transformation (Deleuze 1995) repetition and

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[6] The moral shock is generated when people can relate with the common social and political values, and as a result create shock when the lives of new born people are put into jeopardy due to infrastructural failure (Olesen 2015)

concerns results in shared understanding about the condition that the workers had to experience. Hence the online/virtual meetings, petitions and cartoons are a way to inspire solidarity among people to come out and help. The protest symbols refer to the injustice experienced by the migrant workers. The common theme of the protest symbol was to portray the sense of abandonment both at the government institution and the community levels. Hence, there are images and visuals of a section of people who are locked inside their house while the migrant workers are walking with their family members hoping to return to work in the city once the pandemic is over. There is a sense of resignation as the middle class who could work from home were concerned with the mortal fear of the disease while the migrant workers had the fear of losing their livelihood and returning home safe. Home implies safety and care and the workers did not want to perish with abandonment. Hence, the differences are seen in the pictures where some people are looking out of their balconies and windows seeing the workers defying the curfew without any alternative and heading back home.

The workers who are mostly contractual and responsible for the building of infrastructure and sustaining the economy were abandoned at the time of crisis. The plight of the migrant workers in the year 2020 has had an influence on popular culture as well. For instance, during the Durga Puja festival in Kolkata, where the carnivalesque spirit temporarily dismantles the socioeconomic barriers, the figure of an impoverished migrant mother carrying her children and other essentials was elevated to the divine status of goddess Durga in a Puja Pandal, thereby highlighting the condition of the unprivileged bodies for a cross section of our society. There were social media pages created to make people aware about the plight of the migrant workers. There were donations requested from the people and community kitchens set ups providing food to the migrant workers. The images of the migrant workers made many civil society activists and concerned citizens come outside and aid them into reaching their homes safely. The safety gears were distributed among the migrant workers by many volunteer groups. Hence, it is the politics of compassion and solidarity that took over the politics of 'othering' in the form of stereotypes being attached to them. Compassion for the migrants came from the anger of the abdication of responsibility of the government and other institutions which was channelized in visibilising the plight of the migrant workers and injustice they experienced. It is also inspired by the fact that global gaze is increasingly been subjected to spectacles of terror where the desire to document overpowers acts of

intervention. Hence, the pictures also instigated a section of people to talk, come together and demand justice for the migrant workers. Hashtag activism via social media posts has proved to be a major force in bringing together people in no time. Not only does this digital activism create a sense of alliance with strangers (irrespective of their socioeconomic status) but also the psychological relief of fighting for a common cause without any physical participation has arguably yielded better results in inspiring netizens to raise funds or help the distressed. These visuals give rise to solidarity and compassion with the giving of food, interviewing the migrants, and more importantly communicating and listening to their experiences. Also, by narrating their vulnerability, resistance is shown by the masses where the neoliberal society and state have failed them. This gives them a sense of being heard and articulates their distress on digital platforms.

Another image that appeared in many of the cartoons and visuals depicting the plight of the migrant workers is the railway track and blood. The railway tracks and station became a symbol of displacement and dispossession. The migrant worker often waited for long hours for the trains to arrive and many newspapers carried reports of how the children especially suffered during these journeys. The exhaustion of the journey was depicted across photographs that captured the gestures of people rendered helpless by the lack of institutional aids.

> Across the country, there are men and women with swollen feet. At a quarantine centre in Uttar Pradesh's Gorakhpur district, there is 17-year-old Baliram Kumar, who had walked from Bangalore over 25 days.
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> "My feet are cut and scabbed," he said on the phone, a day after he reached his village. "I had shoes but what good are shoes after a while? I am so tired. My whole body is aching."… Those who walked, however, do not dwell on physical endurance or government failures. What they remember first is the instinct to survive. Ramamurthy, recalling the march of 1942, said, "It was challenging – but you have no

other way to go, it is a question of survival of the fittest. You can't think about it. You just walk."[7]

The image of the bloody feet suggests the injuries suffered from walking. Blood is an imprint that provides a shock effect and exacerbates the degree of suffering. Blood and dirt are considered impure and often indicate the antithesis of civilisation; hence the migrant workers walking with dirt on their faces and clothes and blood-stained feet reflects the dehumanisation of their body. The blood on the railway tracks or on their feet shows how the disenfranchised masses are turned into bare bodies and strips them of the markers of civilization. The dignity and resources required to protect their bodies and the lack thereof, led to the rising death toll during the pandemic as the bodies fall into the zone of indistinction, and are transformed into mere statistical numbers without social value. Hunger became the marker of a lesser citizen at this time, and entire lives were derailed by bureaucratic apathy.. The stale *rotis* pictured on the rail track became viral – the measure of the distance between people and the state. While the virus circulated, the exchange of foods and essential commodities continued to be carried out by the essential workers but who were themselves invisibilised. Appropriate distancing norms along with maintaining safety protocols could not be met by the floating population and instead their lives were considered dispensable. These visuals consisted of protest symbols that caused moral/ethical shock and hence, even during the pandemic, many people came out risking their lives and communicated their support by urging the government to bring relief to the workers.

Placards are held by the people in order to communicate visually the need to give ration and food to those people who have been stuck and unable to move. The written words increase the visibility on the new media site. It is also

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[7] https://scroll.in/article/963641/a-story-of-swollen-feet-the-physical-toll-of-walking-home-during-lockdown

an approach in which silence as well as words have both been deployed to communicate. The placards are mimetic practices that bring solidarity to all the migrant workers and other civil society that have taken up the cause. These images are different as they do not show the distraught faces of the workers or include them within a frame, rather their faces are clearly seen owning their words. The helplessness has given way to anger and a demand for the rights to have basic amenities. Marches are carried out by people expressing rage and demanding safety from the government and protesting against the neoliberal ideals of self-reliance when a large section of people have lost their livelihood and are out of work. There were salutations to the Corona warriors, people who hailed from different organisations or common people helping those affected in times of distress by providing food, medicines and other services at the time of isolation. They showed civic responsibility and care to the people suffering and won accolades from them.

Conclusion

The protest symbols are circulated with the intention to raise consciousness of people as the lockdown resulted in people quarantining themselves at home, while there were a large number of migrant workers who had to defy curfew restrictions and walk many miles to reach their home. The struggles of the economically vulnerable migrant workers for sustaining their livelihood and to reach home have been captured both by the reporters as well as the common people. During the pandemic there were fears about their mobility and vilification as carriers of disease and spreading of the virus. Amidst this degree of mistrust, there were also images of vulnerability and helplessness picked up by the people which resulted in becoming viral, bearing a strong resemblance with other historical events that have by now become iconic. These visuals were created in response to the vulnerabilities captured by the reporters and within those frameworks, there were protests staged by making and moulding those images into symbols of injustice. The assemblage of digital technologies, expansion of visibility and the suffering of the migrants generated visuals that are related to historical events, showing resistance through their vulnerability.

The second wave also witnessed the same infrastructural inadequacy when it came to the surging number of people requiring oxygen cylinders while there were none available, revealing the poor healthcare infrastructure. Dr. Rieux's concluding meanderings or Hegel's

famous dictum that 'what experience and history teach is this—that peoples and governments never have learned anything from history, or acted on principles deduced from it', seems truer than ever (1894: 19). As the waves subside, it seems we are being transported away from the disturbing visuals to the grand columns of the Central Vista, the 'fastest growing economy', bullet trains, and so on. Far from learning much needed lessons from the pandemic, we are currently caught in the frenzy to 'move on'.

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