

The Virus of Democratically Elected Authoritarianism

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India's migrant crisis is a product of its post-1991 development strategy and the unaccountable nature of the prime minister's office.

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Among the more tragic images of the COVID-19 pandemic in India are those related to deaths that are not directly the result of the coronavirus. There is the haunting image of a two-year-old trying to wake up her dead mother on a railway platform. The mother had died of starvation as she sought to return to her village after the lockdown following the pandemic resulted in her losing her job in the city. There were the workers who were mowed down by India's unruly traffic as they tried to find their way to their villages, sometimes more than a thousand kilometres away, on foot. The hundreds of migrant lives lost were a reminder of just how devastating the unstable mix of textbook economics and political individualism can be.

The economic reform path India has followed since the 1990s has been marked by a strict adherence to elementary mainstream economics. The reforms have had their successes, as when previously constrained sectors of the economy registered significantly higher growth rates. The celebrations around these sporadic successes have largely blinded policy makers to the assumptions of mainstream economics that were not consistent with the Indian reality. High on the list of such assumptions is that of the perfect mobility of labour.

We only need to step back for a moment and consider the larger transformation taking place in the Indian economy to recognize the sheer magnitude of this assumption, and just how far it is from reality. For all the focus on India's emerging economy status, the real challenge is a much more mundane and painful one. Tens of millions of workers are being forced out of agriculture. India's inheritance laws require property, including agricultural land, to be divided among members of the succeeding generation. This results in smaller and less viable farms, forcing the smaller cultivators to either become agricultural labour or move out of agriculture altogether. Arthur Lewis and his successors would expect these workers to be absorbed in higher productivity, and hence higher wage, urban industries. But the transformation of rural agricultural workers to urban industrial ones is neither smooth nor painless.

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The first challenge workers have to overcome is a spatial one. The districts where workers are being forced out of agriculture are largely to the north and the east of India. There are districts in this part of the country where a major portion of workers cannot find work for even six months in a year. These marginal workers, as the Census of India classifies them, are forced to look outside their villages for work. The non-agricultural work options available to them—formal or informal, legal or illegal—are extremely limited in the vicinity of their villages. The engines of economic growth that have emerged in India, particularly after 1991, are concentrated to the south and the west of the country. Distance then becomes a major challenge agricultural workers in India have to overcome to realize the economists’ expectation of a movement from agriculture to industry.

The challenge of distance is compounded by a second constraint: raising migration capital to move from village to city. There are those at the very bottom of the rural economic hierarchy who would struggle to even raise the costs of transportation to the city, let alone the additional resources required for urban survival until they find a job. Even those who are just above the poverty line could find the costs of a permanent migration of their families to the city prohibitive. Those who determine the course of Indian cities are preoccupied with these urban centres being compared with metropolises in the West. A substantial portion of public investment in Indian cities is on glamorous projects from international airports to expressways. Combined with a policy stance that these projects must be paid for by user fees, this strategy has raised the cost of living in the city. While workers can expect higher nominal wages in the city, their real wages are depressed by the cost of urban living.

Agricultural workers from the north and east of India, seeking non-agricultural opportunities to the south and west of the country, have responded to the divergence between nominal and real wages with a strategy of their own. They have sought to earn higher urban wages even as they spend their earnings in their lower priced villages. This strategy typically involves one or more members of a family working in the city while the rest of the family stays in the village. The worker lives in extremely congested conditions in the city. A survey done by the National Institute of Advanced Studies, India, showed that migrant workers in the south Indian metropolis of Bengaluru spent very little in the city. The workers shared already congested rooms and owned very few assets in the city. Apart from a mobile phone to keep in touch with their family, the rest of their assets were in the household in the village. The dualism of a family split between the city and the village is the price the worker pays to survive the transformation from agriculture to non-agriculture.

The extent of this phenomenon is usually buried under the narrative of India's rising metropolises. The stories of these metropolises are typically generated around the built spaces that are created, rather than the labour that creates them. The COVID-19 pandemic has cracked this façade. The lockdown following the pandemic saw migrant workers losing their jobs. The sudden loss of jobs meant that they many a time did not get the wages that were due to them. The contractors who had brought them to the city often disappeared. Without the wages to pay their rents, a large number of workers were evicted from their shared, rented accommodation in the city. They had little option but to find their way back to their villages.

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Moving tens of millions of workers over thousands of kilometres would have been a challenge at the best of times. This phenomenally difficult task was made into a tragedy by the government ensuring migrant workers were not given the benefit of time. Prime Minister Modi went on national television at 8 p.m. on March 24 to announce that there would be a lockdown from March 25 – the workers had just four late-night hours to return to their villages. Some of the workers, whose villages were within a radius of a couple of hundred kilometres from the city, did manage to react quickly enough to make the trip before the lockdown was strictly enforced. But since the bulk of the migrants were displaced from agriculture to the north and east of the country to find work in cities to the south and west of India, they typically found themselves stranded more than a thousand kilometres away from their village homes. With no trains or buses available and no place to live in the city, they began to walk home. Some of them scrambled on top of fully loaded trucks, and fell prey to India's notoriously unpredictable highway traffic. Others slept on railway tracks to avoid the snakes on the grass around them, thinking the trains were not running. Unfortunately for some of them, the freight trains were still running and could not spot them in the dark.

It is tempting to attribute this escalation in the non-virus costs of the pandemic to Prime Minister Modi's idiosyncrasies. His penchant for the 8 p.m. slot for his dramatic televised announcements may or may not have something to do with primetime television, but it gives very little time for those who are affected to react. This could be justified in the case of measures such as demonetization, which took the majority of Indian currency out of circulation, as giving the corrupt little time to escape. But there is little merit to find in a decision that leaves tens of millions of workers stranded.

A preoccupation with Prime Minister Modi's methods however hides a more fundamental difficulty with the Indian political process. For all the unexpected success India can legitimately claim in maintaining a democracy over decades, its policy making process remains largely individual-centric, lending itself to authoritarian tendencies. This authoritarian orientation of the office of India's prime minister can be traced back to the origins of the world's largest democracy. When India gained independence as a

developing country of great diversity, few gave it a chance of surviving as a democracy. Its first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, recognized the challenge of making policy for the country as a whole through a parliament whose members represented very local interests. He responded by setting up a policy-making mechanism, including the Planning Commission, a now-defunct institution that prepared India's five-year plans, that reported directly to him and not to his cabinet.

The separation of policy making from the democratic exercise was consolidated by later prime ministers. Indira Gandhi functioned with a kitchen cabinet and an enlarged prime minister's office. Rajiv Gandhi institutionalized the distinction through the anti-defection law. Parliamentarians now risked losing their membership of parliament if they voted against the party leadership. In the case of the ruling party that was the prime minister. Even when a political lightweight like Manmohan Singh was prime minister, he was seen to be representing the power of Sonia Gandhi, rather than the collective wisdom of his cabinet.

This democratically elected authoritarianism has had its implications for the functioning of Indian politics between elections. Once a leader is elected, they get a free hand in policy making over the next five years. Since this power cannot be challenged in India's democratic institutions it is questioned only in courts or on the streets. The ruling political dispensation, in turn, responds to such challenges by creating and using laws that are better suited to authoritarian regimes.

Democratically elected authoritarianism has had its consequences for the course India has taken, and will continue to influence the path the country takes in the coming years. It can lead to decisions that have not had the critical scrutiny that democracy provides. A government that times the waves in its popularity to match election cycles can carry out measures that harm large numbers within the country in the period between elections. Prime Minister Modi's demonetization caused huge economic damage to those dependent on the informal sector, but it could be brushed aside at election time through an aggressive anti-Pakistan campaign.

The COVID-19 pandemic placed the dramatic gestures Prime Minister Modi uses to build a political image of a decisive leader, against the needs of tens of millions of migrant workers. In the rather cynical domain of Indian politics the loss of life may well be seen as no more than collateral damage. The shortage of migrant labour, and the resultant higher wages, are also likely to be swept under the carpet of economic jargon. But it may be time to systematically evaluate the costs of India's potent mix of democratically elected authoritarianism and an unquestioning faith in the assumptions of textbook mainstream economics.

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