

Chapter 9

Pushing to further proletarianization...

Neo-liberal economic policies launched by the India's Central Government in 1990's launched the twin onslaughts of communalism and 'economic reforms' undoubtedly sharpened and exacerbated the perceptions among the marginalized communities like small farmers, pastoralists, fishers and fish workers, adivasi, dalits and minorities and their livelihoods, lifestyles and identities are under further threat. The present Central Government led by Narendra Modi and BJP further accentuated the crisis and changed how economic indicators such as real GDP and unemployment are calculated, they cannot hide the reality of the working class - falling incomes, declining jobs, little to no social support, increasing labour rights violations, worsening environmental conditions, regressive agricultural policies and a general fear of life for India's most marginalized sections and oppressed citizens.

Neoliberal capitalism in India has exacerbated wealth inequality in several ways. It has widened the income inequality. As the proportion of income that is saved (for adding to wealth) is greater for the upper-income groups, a rise in income inequality increases both the overall saving ratio in the economy as well as the degree of concentration of wealth in the hands of the few rich. As a rule, neo-liberal policies has been slowly abolishing state support for agricultural production and small-scale production and the Central Government is pushing the big capitalists and multinational corporations (MNCs) in it. By doing so, those sectors are undermined, causing small or marginal farmers to migrate to the cities in search of work. Farmers are joining the army of wage labourers in the cities. Similarly, these policies remove all restrictions on the rate of technological-cum-structural change. Thus, labour productivity is raised rapidly, making employment growth insufficient to absorb even natural increases in the workforce, let alone the distressed farmer migrants.

This creates slack in the labour market, which keeps the wage-rate low even as labour productivity increases. Since the ratio of wage-rate to labour productivity is nothing else but the share of wages, this share decreases, and the share of those who live on the surplus (i.e. non-wage income), typically the rich and the professional classes, increases. A rise in income, and hence wealth inequality is thus embedded in the structure of neo-liberal capitalism¹.

¹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2018/1/26/why-is-indias-wealth-inequality-growing-so-rapidly/>

However, quite apart from its effect on the labour market, the out-migration of small farmers and petty producers is typically associated with a loss of assets by them. When migrants leave for the city, they abandon their houses or their land or are forced to sell them at low prices. Moreover, their assets may be expropriated simply to assist with infrastructure projects (roads, dams, factories, etc.) that involve real estate invariably. The result is a greater concentration of wealth in the hands of few.

Adivasis employed in sugar units and factories, pushed back and dumped during COVID

In Chapter 1 'Khandesh adivasis further pushed to impoverisation' there is description about how landless adivasis confronting financial hardship living in the villages of Khandesh region of Maharashtra are hired as cutters in couples by sugar co-operative factories run in Gujarat through an obscure but efficient network of labour brokers or mukadams, who thrive on seasonal distress. These mukadams deployed by managing committees of the sugar co-operative factories scout the interior of the adivasi belt in the Khandesh region, which has been developed as 'labour catchment area²' for them. A few thousand rupees, advanced in the monsoon, allow the adivasi families to subsist. This amount are paid back through labour in the harvest season. Whole adivasi families, adults and children, then get pulled into the work. Every year when the monsoon begins its retreat from the villages of Khandesh and Marathwada belt up to half-a-million of its rural poor, majority of them being adivasis and dalits, begins a desperate migration for work that ends in India's largest swathe of sugar country. The annual migration is over 45 years old and its routes are well established. The employers more than 200 sugar cooperative factories across the three-state swathe and employees' landless adivasis and dalits or subsistence farmers are also constant but sugarcane profits keep spiralling. The profits grow even as the migrant adivasi or workers remain impoverished.

These adivasi workers, who migrate from Khandesh region working at over 100 different sugarcane cooperatives situated in Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh were pushed back to Maharashtra during the national lockdown due to pandemic outburst as the as owners of those cooperative factories refused to take responsibility. Most of these sugarcane co-operative factories were owned by the local politicians. Most of the adivasi workers returned back to their villages

² <https://ruralindiaonline.org/en/articles/the-sugarcane-cutters-bitter-harvest/>

without collecting their wages. They were not provided food or even an allowance to travel back home.

Pandemic intensifies Inequalities

In Chapter 2 'Maharashtra's marginalized communities still at the crossroads' states that the greatest man made humanitarian crisis since independence the COVID-19 pandemic played out across India, prevailing inequalities got intensified due to government policies and approaches during the arbitrarily declared, unplanned lockdown. The curtain of invisibility that hitherto concealed the existence of 10 crores of workers, termed migrant workers, has been torn asunder through myriad images of horrendous suffering³. This huge section of India's labour force or rather India's life force, majority of these workers are adivasis, who have been stripped of their rights as equal citizens of India. They are, along with all sections of the working class and working people whose basic rights are under attack, are hostage in the war that the PM Modi-led Central Government is waging to get out of the huge crisis that the capitalist economy faces. The package is a reflection of this class war. Millions of men and women workers denied public transport forced to walk hundreds of kilometres is equally a reflection of this war. One aspect is their common suffering and exploitation with all other migrant workers. The second aspect is the specific deprivations adivasis face as adivasis, as forest dwellers or in villages in hilly areas, which has the specific impact of the lockdown and⁴ the so-called package on adivasi lives and livelihood.

The migration of adivasi workers had already started when the lockdown was suddenly imposed. In Maharashtra, adivasis are reporting that work has stopped the contractors often snubbed by the principal employer, have run away leaving the adivasis stranded. Adivasi migrants, since they are not part of the so-called mainstream cultures are even more vulnerable to the general hostility towards the poor displayed by State agencies particularly the police⁵. During the lockdown, unable to get assistance and despairing of any free travel home, adivasi migrants from Maharashtra like other migrants started the long and painful march home often avoiding highways, travelling through forests and side roads to avoid the police. The Inter-State Migrant Workers Act, 1979, the only law for migrant workers, is on the way to being scrapped by the Central

3 <https://ipanewspack.com/2020/05/adivasi-communities-are-worst-hit-by-lock-down/>

4 https://peoplesdemocracy.in/2020/0524_pd/impact-lockdown-adivasi-communities

5 <https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/playing-out-live-a-narrative-of-discrimination/article31560942.ece>

Government led by Narendra Modi as part of its agenda of labour reform. It is to be merged with the labour code, which is an instrument to destroy the hard won rights of the working class. Although the 1979 law is quite inadequate since it deals only with those migrant workers in the contractor system and excludes workers who migrate on their own, for adivasi migrant workers employed through contractors, its implementation would have ensured payment as well as free travel back home. In fact according to the law, the Central Government is legally liable to ensure free travel home since it is responsible for the termination of the work emanating out of the lockdown. Most adivasi habitats have so far been free of the Corona virus. Adivasis are particularly vulnerable to the virus if it is introduced in adivasi areas due to acute vulnerability caused by malnutrition, anaemia⁶.

Instead of tackling the grave situation emerging out of pandemic in adivasi areas, the Central Government- led by Modi used the lockdown to further its pro-capitalist class agenda including in spheres which directly dilute the constitutional and legal rights of adivasis. It is also in this period that the Supreme Court gave its highly questionable judgment against prevailing reservations in school teachers' posts for only Adivasis in Fifth Schedule areas in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. Many aspects of the judgment will have a negative impact on special constitutional provisions for adivasis under the Fifth Schedule beyond the issue of reservations⁷.

Adivasi migrant workers of Maharashtra were worst-affected people as they along with Dalits are the backbone of the large pool of migrant workers who faced discrimination back in their villages. Many of them moved to cities to escape the deeply entrenched social inequalities in rural areas but found their hopes of a better life dashed when the virus struck⁸ their villages.

State- sponsored plunder and loot pushes adivasis to further proletarianization

In Chapter 4 'Chhattisgarh, a new state formed to continue age old rulers' tradition to grab Adivasis land and continue repression' it has been delineated that in state there has been a massive illegal loot of forest and mineral resources⁹. It ranks second in the nation in terms of total forest land diverted for mining purposes – accounting for 15%. The brunt of this diversion is being faced by the Adivasi communities in the area. The Adivasis have been agitating

⁶ <https://uk.movies.yahoo.com/indias-caravan-misery-migrant-workers-135701023.html>

⁷ <https://www.iasbhai.com/the-untold-story-of-adivasis-super-exploitation-upsc/>

⁸ <https://kochipost.com/2020/05/23/adivasi-communities-are-worst-hit-by-the-lockdown/>

⁹ <https://coronapolicyimpact.org/2020/05/12/playing-out-live-a-narrative-of-discrimination/>

against displacement on an unprecedented scale - for mining, setting up of industries, dams, sanctuaries, four laning of highways, the posh capital region, and even army and air bases. Whether it be the sponge-iron belt of Raipur, the cement belt between Raipur and Bilaspur, the coal mines of Koriya, bauxite mines of Sarguja, the power plants of Korba and above all Jindal-land – Raigarh - where the writ of the Jindal company ran Raigarh, as they enjoy significant de facto police and administrative powers, all these areas have been witness to widespread displacement, inadequate rehabilitation and compensation, and devastation of the environment particularly the clearing of pristine forests, toxic air pollution, turning up waters red with sludge and drying up of water sources and dumping of ash.

The pace and extent of the land grab increased vastly during the BJP rule, with not an inch of largely Adivasi Jashpur left unaffected by prospecting and mining licenses, 34 power plants in the Janjgir district and 7 cement plants in the Baloda Bazar district where units of multinationals Holcim and Lafarge and of the Birla group – Ultratech, Grasim and Century were already there.

The Land Acquisition Act 2013 was brought ostensibly because of the fierce countrywide resistance of the peasantry and Adivasis against land acquisition, far from addressing any of the serious legal issues, it appears that the Act actually facilitated corporate land grab.

The Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act 2013 provides for enhanced rates of compensation to be given to those whose lands have been acquired for developmental projects. However, there has been an ongoing attempt at diluting the same.

Gautam Adani and Hasdeo Arand project in Chhattisgarh

Gautam Adani, the billionaire who trots the globe with the Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been approved of coal extraction in Hasdeo Arand, one of the largest contiguous stretches of dense forest in central India, covering about 170,000 hectares (420,080 acres) of the state of Chhattisgarh¹⁰. It is rich in biodiversity, contains many threatened species and is home to elephants, leopards and sloth bears. It is also home to the Gond adivasis as the Hasdeo Arand sits on top of more than a billion metric tons of coal reserves. Adivasis are fighting a rear-guard action against the mining giant Adani to protect their

10 <https://madaraka.online/2020/02/13/2422/>

ancestral homelands and of the India's richest and most diverse regions. If the coal mining starts then adivasis will lose everything.

Gond Adivasis, who chop wood collected from the forest outside Ghatbarra village, failed to see the upside. Most of them are of the opinion that Mining would bring us close to death. The Adani project is going to devastate everything nature has given us. One-time compensation for the land is not enough – adivasis need much more than money to survive. They need nature to be with them.

Pauperization of the pastoralists, joining the army of the proletariats

In Chapter 6 'Pastoralists grazing rights squeezed' it indicates that presently pastoral institutions face the increasing threat of mass displacement from economic factors such as agriculture, population growth, droughts and herd displacements. Pastoralism appears to be losing the battle as a way of life and a production system. Pastoral activities are complex, and it's dependent on the delicate balance between human population, livestock and natural resources. Despite its reputation as one of the most challenging and complex agricultural and natural resource development tasks, pastoralists who were once a powerful economic and political community have been steadily marginalised by non-recognition of its importance and dominance of the sedentary approach to life and livelihoods practised since the time of the British.

However, many experts estimate that the 1.2 billion people in India are pastoralists, yet most people know very little about them. Pastoralists are quite evidently an invisible constituency and that issues and interests are not reflected in development policies or in the general governance of this country. Due to increasing commercial pressures on land, the impact of globalization, and climate change, pastoralists' situation is the same worldwide and deteriorating rapidly. In India, pastoralists have no choice but drastically reduce herd sizes, and many are eventually pushed out of pastoralism. Pastoralists who have lived in harmony with nature and livestock for centuries always complain that they can no longer decide how many livestock they can keep.

The corporate interest in land has become perhaps pastoralists' greatest threat. Land grabbing is a global phenomenon and little can be done to stop the loot and plunder. The rush for land to meet capitalist interests is targeting all kinds of land, but it is much easier to grab common land¹¹. Often, these common lands do not require any financial compensation to be paid. Particularly when there is

¹¹ <https://thesolutionsjournal.com/2016/08/19/indias-pastoralist-communities-solutions-survival/>

a weak governance framework or none at all. There are innumerable cases where pastoral lands are taken without the free, prior, and informed consent of the people who had been living on those lands for generations. Pastoralist ways of life are characterized by their ability to convert marginal resources in dry and arid regions into productive resources such as milk, meat, wool, and manure using few, if any, inputs. Livestock keeping is becoming increasingly unprofitable for them. Pastoralists are left with few options as a result. Pastoralism has been their entire lives for most of them. Even though they are experts around animal husbandry, they also have extensive knowledge

For most of them, their entire lives have been dedicated to pastoralism. They often have little formal education despite having a great deal of knowledge about animal husbandry. Thus, they have few skills that are relevant to other forms of modern employment. When these pastoralists stop keeping livestock, they join the army of wage labourers.

Further pauperisation of Fishers and Fish workers as coronavirus adds to their woes

India's fish markets collapsed during two national lockdowns, impoverishing hundreds of thousands of small fishers. Recovery is not in sight. COVID-19 and climate change are a myriad of other issues. Lockdowns after first and second waves to contain COVID-19 have impacted the livelihoods of small fishers and fish workers. Fishing activities were forced to cease in many areas due to two lockdowns. There has been a severe disruptions to the supply chain during two lockdowns. Despite fishing, fishers were not able to sell the fish in the market. Climate change and pollution have seriously hurt inland and marine fishers alike, with the lockdowns adding to their hardship. The Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute (CMFRI) estimates that marine fishers alone produced 3.69 million metric tons in 2018. The catch was already down over 6% from the 2012 catch of 3,94 million metric tons. Inland fisheries do not have reliable estimates of their production.

During the first lockdown abruptly announced by PM Narendra Modi on March 24, 2020, caught many fishers by surprise because they were at sea at the time. The second lockdown deepened the crisis of fishers and fish workers. Marine Products Export Development Authority (MPEDA) official mentioned that since the police cordoned off the harbour, MPEDA couldn't get information on how many boats came or what was caught. Several exporters and processors are refused to accept catches as their storage facilities were full during two lockdowns.

Women fish vendors have been severely affected. Women are unable to sell their fish because they cannot ride a cycle like a male vendor, and there is no public transportation.

COVID-19 impacts fishers on top of more frequent cyclones, sea water acidification, coral reef irreparable damage, coastal erosion, rise of salt water and warmer seawater impacting fish habitats, all climate change impacts.

Rivers and lakes have been encroached upon in West Bengal. Pollution has resulted in little or no fish in these waters. Thousands of fishers and fish workers are facing extinction due to climate change impacts, pollution and COVID-19. Many are looking for alternative livelihoods.

Labour codes for pushing working class to darker days

From April 1, 2021, the Central Government led by Narendra Modi implemented labour codes which would further accentuate the crisis and pushing the working class to darker days. The employment rules notified for the code on occupational safety, health, and working conditions say the daily working hours can be stretched up to twelve hours. New machines, developing production processes, developing new skills, and corporates feeding new levels in the evolution of finance capital are bringing back the dark days for the Indian working class.

The shedding of rights, the criminalization of those who challenge attacks on democratic traditions and therefore the diminution of everything sacred are the beginning of this backsliding. On April 1, 2021 the dark days of 134 years ago was brought back, nullifying the gains the working class have made after struggling for decades. Their working hours were stretched up to more than twelve hours, jobs were rare and irregular, taxes were high, and their earnings were paltry.

Workers assembled at the Haymarket Square in Chicago on May 1, 1886 and took out a rally for eight-hour work day, where police fired and 11 workers became martyrs. Martyrs lives did not go in vain, and eventually the eight-hour work day became universal. Over the years, workers have been observing May 1st as International Workers Day all over the world. In 1890, the Second International established a regular day to commemorate the workers' victory.

On April 1, 2021 the work days were stretched to twelve hours. Parliament has been used to enforce the labour codes on workers. Labour codes supersedes 13 existing rules of central labour law. BJP-rules states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat has already implemented and extended working hours to twelve in an effort to recoup the losses incurred during two pandemic-induced

lockdowns. State Governments argued that the measure was needed to boost output amid a shortage of labour. Pandemic had given ploy to squeeze further rights of the working class. In reality, the work force is restricted because it has been kept down in order to preserve wages and also to maintain a surplus of workers waiting to be hired on an unconditional basis.

The four labour codes are in opposition to the existing labour laws, which had protected the rights of workers all along, and soon it would be replaced.

However, the Modi Government has declared a virtual war on the working class of the country. The state governments of UP, MP and Gujarat, all led by BJPs, have already destroyed or rendered totally ineffective state labour laws, with the blessings of Central Government. Uttarakhand, Haryana, Assam, Goa, Himachal Pradesh, Odisha, Rajasthan, and Punjab have increased working hours to 12 hours a day, some with overtime wages and some without, and for three months¹² or three years as in other states. The Central Government has cunningly chose the critical period of pandemic outburst to push through all its anti-people measures under the garb of COVID-19. Normally, such measures would have been met with a massive backlash from workers, but now that the lockdown and the Epidemics and Disaster Management act are in effect, workers are handicapped to respond to the government's systematic attack on labour laws. India's self-sufficiency cannot be achieved by just relying on foreign capital or by removing labour laws to attract foreign investment. . . Self-reliance for Modi is only a rhetoric, rather than a belief in the ability of the country to provide for itself. It is nothing but a mockery to talk about self-reliance while forcing workers and the toiling masses into slavery and bondage, and making India subservient to global capital and imperialist powers.

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12 <https://www.cpiml.net/liberation/2020/05/modi-regimes-war-on-working-class>