

Margins to Media: Digital Media Narratives of Migrant Labour during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Migration has long been a major topic of research in many fields, as there are different reasons why people move, such as economic, social, cultural, demographic, geographical, physical, political, institutional, and psychological considerations. The COVID-19 epidemic broke out suddenly, followed by a lockdown in 2020. This showed how vulnerable migrants are around the world, especially in India, and it was a major threat to human life. Most importantly, the pandemic revealed the deplorable conditions of millions of migrant labourers across the globe, whose mass exodus became one of the most heart-wrenching humanitarian crises of recent times. This paper explores the role of digital media in highlighting the plight of migrants who were denied basic needs like food, clothing, safety, identity, recognition, and belonging, as well as the tragedy of the homeless, who remained invisible in India during the pandemic.

Keywords: Migrant labour, COVID-19 pandemic, lockdown, Digital activism, hashtag Campaigns.

History is replete with tremendous literature on migrants through novels, dramas, and poems. The rise in technology and the availability of digital platforms have facilitated the articulation of stories about displacement, financial insecurity, and social exclusion during the pandemic. Real-time photographs, hashtag campaigns, and televised debates reached every nook and corner of the globe, crossing not only state boundaries but also digital borders to gain global attention through digital media, highlighting the urgent need for comprehensive strategies and finding sustainable solutions by involving stakeholders from different dimensions, including

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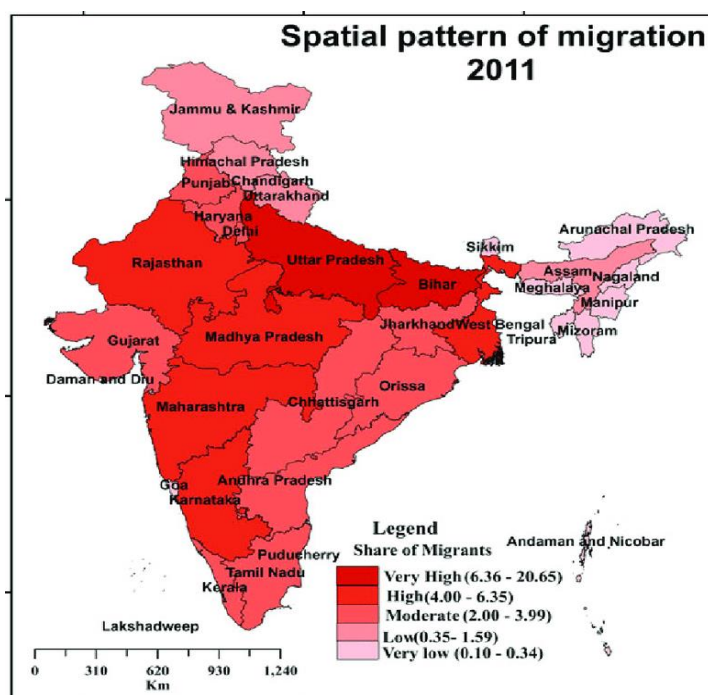
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policymakers, civil society, voluntary organizations, NGOs, and international organizations to uphold the rights and dignity of the migrants.

The sudden outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 shattered the socio-economic fabric of society, and the lockdown was a severe crisis for India's migrant labourers, who are responsible for 10% of the GDP. As businesses closed and communities were shuttered, millions of workers were left jobless, homeless, and disenfranchised. They were driven to travel the perilous path back to their native places. Capturing, mediating, and challenging this humanitarian disaster as it evolved in real time depended critically on digital media channels. They helped to record and disseminate narratives that, absent from the dominant discourse otherwise, would not have been obvious. Photographs, videos, and testimonies showcasing the lived experiences of migrant workers were shared by citizen reporters, independent content providers, and grassroots organizations on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Twitter. These digital stories challenged prevailing narratives and humanized statistical data by elevating marginalized voices and evoking public empathy, outrage, and solidarity.

Map 1: Spatial Pattern of Migration, 2011

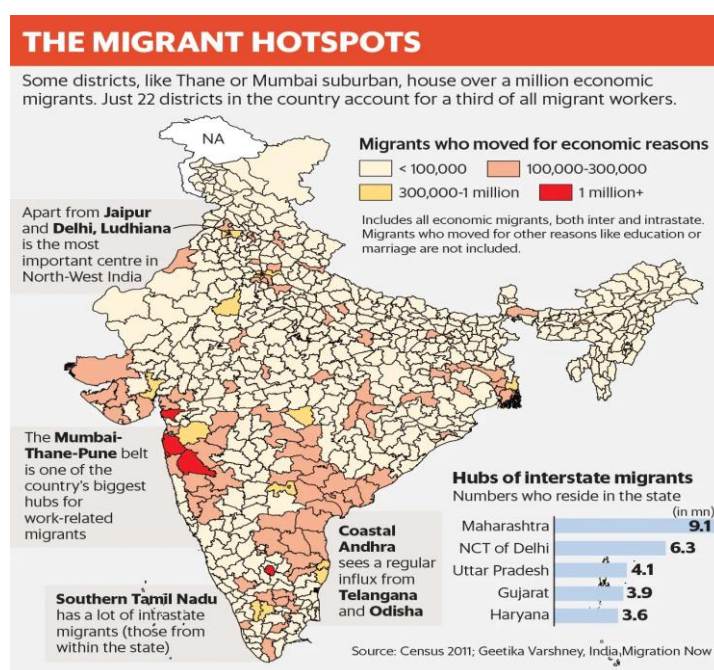


Source: Census of India, 2011, New Delhi

Migration in the Indian Context

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the worldwide debate about migration by making it clear that we need migrant workers. In India, where a lot of people move around inside the country, the March 2020 shutdown caused a big reverse migration. India's economic growth and Urbanisation are mostly caused by people moving from one state to another. According to Census 2011 data on interstate migrant labour, more than 41.4 million people moved from one state to another in search of work. Migration is what makes people move from one job to another; it helps different businesses balance the supply and demand for workers.

Map 2: The Migration Hotspots, 2020



Source: Mint e paper, 18.5.2020 by Priya Deshingkar, University of Sussex, Brighton, UK.

Here we can thoroughly examine the percentage of migrant workers among all workers in India's main sectors. At 45.6 crore, India boasts that 38% of its population is migrants. The population grew by 18% between 2001 and 2011; the migrant count soared by 45%. Of all migrations, 99% were domestic; 1% came from abroad. Among the 21-crore rural-urban migrants, 54% were classified as internal migrants. Of all internal migration, nearly 88% originated within states. Maharashtra and Delhi were the main receiving states; Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were the primary providers of inter-state migrants. In intra-state migration, marriage and family reasons motivated most (70%). India, comprising 37% of the population, reports 45.36 crore internal migrants. With a projected workforce of 50 crores, annual net migration flows accounted for about 1% of the working-age population. The data reaffirms the dominance

of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, along with other Hindi-speaking states, as main source states, while Maharashtra, Delhi, Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, and Haryana absorbed half of the migrants. (See map.)

The Role of Digital Media During the Crisis

Real-time reporting depends critically on digital media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and WhatsApp. Using these venues, reporters, activists, and even regular people brought attention to the situation of migrant labour. Global interest was piqued by viral pictures of men dying of tiredness, a migrant worker pulling his disabled wife on a cart, moms cradling children by roadside shelters, and travellers travelling hundreds of kilometres. Each picture narrates a heart-touching story in itself.



Source: Pictures compiled from Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp etc.

Digital Media as Platform of Resistance

Digital media, especially YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook, played a significant role in highlighting the crisis. People from every corner of the world used these platforms to document and disseminate their experiences in real-time. Heartfelt narratives and songs, with a fervent plea to hear the unheard, to see the unseen, and to feel the unfelt, echoed from the hearts of writers, singers, and artists. An attempt has been made in this paper to explore the heartfelt tributes to the trials and tribulations of migrant labour through the notable lyrics by Javed Akhtar, Monoj Muntashir and Adesh Ravi.

Javed Akhtar's Song – Fellow Traveller

One of the finest examples of a profound tribute to migrant labour is a song by Javed Akhtar, an Indian screenwriter, lyricist, and poet. His song acts as a moving response to one of the most tragic humanitarian crises caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The theme of 'fellow traveller' embodies the ideas of solidarity and moral duty, using the metaphor of a journey, which signifies not just literal migration but an existential condition shared across social structures. Akhtar's employment of free verse avoids embellishment in favour of stark realism.

Main uske saath chalta hoon, par wo mujhe nahi dekhta

(I walk beside him, but he doesn't see me),

Uska dukh mera dukh hai, uska safar mera bhi hai"

(His sorrow is my sorrow; his journey is mine too)

The couplets in the song glorify the empathy of an urban elite. The song does not name any specific government or policy, but it aligns with socially committed art, echoing voices like Habib Tanvir, Faiz Ahmed Faiz, and Safdar Hashmi, where poetry becomes a medium of resistance and remembrance. As a digital media artefact, *Fellow Traveller* contributed meaningfully to the pandemic discourse, offering a quiet but powerful witness to the human cost of systemic neglect. It remains a significant example of how poetry can console, resist, and remember.

Manoj Muntashir's poem *Tum jugnuvon ke jagirdar*

Manoj Muntashir is an Indian lyricist, poet, dialogue writer and screenwriter. His poem, *Tum jugnuvon ke jagirdar* is a highly poetic tribute to the migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, loaded with emotional depth. The poem elevates the dignity of the underprivileged by highlighting migrant workers not as refugees are victims but as actual torchbearers of hope and resilience. Muntashir's use of firefly as a symbol of hope and light from within aligns with a quote from Dhammapada Upanishad, which goes, *Aatma Deepu Bhava* meaning Be Your Own Light.

Muntashir's highly elevated tone highlights the struggles and difficulties of the refugees as silent heroism rather than passive suffering. This heart-touching lyric is a poignant

contribution to the literature of the pandemic era. His verse is both accessible and profound, appealing to the emotional and moral sensibilities of the listener. By centring the dignity of labour and the endurance of the human spirit, Muntashir crafts a narrative that counters dominant portrayals of pity or neglect.

Muntashir points the lens outward to honour endurance and quiet strength, while Akhtar directs it inward to challenge privilege and indifference. Their contrasting approaches enrich the poetic archive of the epidemic by offering a variety of reactions to the same societal wound—one elegiac, the other epiphanic.

Adesh Ravi's song, *Idisi pedete nadisi nenu pothanu saaru*

Adesh Ravi, a singer, composer, and lyricist, created the song *Idisi Pedete Nadisi Nenu Pothanu Saaru* (ఇదిసి పెడితే నడిసి నేను పోతాను), which is a highly sensitive, colloquial, and creative response to the migration issues during the COVID-19 pandemic in India. Although it was not widely covered in mainstream media, the song had a significant impact on Telugu-speaking communities, reflecting the mental and physical hardships faced by migrant workers. The title of the song, meaning "If you leave, I walk and go, sir," highlights the perseverance and determination of migrant labourers who are deeply concerned about reaching their homes and the challenges they face.

Within the larger framework of pandemic-era art, *Idisi Pedete Nadisi Nenu Pothanu Saaru* supports pieces like *Tum Jugnuvon Ke Jagirdaar* by Manoj Muntashir and Javed Akhtar's *Fellow Traveller* to augment a collective narrative honouring the hardships of the underprivileged. Adesh Ravi's song presents an insider's view, therefore providing a voice to the migrants themselves, while Akhtar and Muntashir offer points of view grounded in empathy and tribute.

Ravi's song reflects the socioeconomic inequalities the epidemic caused, and not only records a historical event but also acts as a cultural relic. Its emotional depth and genuineness make it a major addition to India's canon of socially concerned music.

Besides songs, stories, digital activism played the most influential role. Hashtag activism surged significantly during the COVID-19 epidemic; hashtag campaigns have become effective means for mobilization, awareness-raising, and protest. Defined as the use of social

media tags to coordinate group action and conversation, hashtag activism became increasingly important as physical protest was often unfeasible during the period of lockdowns and social distancing.

Hashtags like #MigrantLivesMatter, #LockdownMigration, #InvisibleIndia, #COVIDIOTS, #JusticeForHealthWorkers, and #BlackLivesMatter were used to amplify voices and mobilize support. Independent media houses and freelance journalists bypassed traditional news hierarchies to bring raw, unfiltered accounts of suffering directly to the public.

Media and Literary Narratives: Bridging the Divide

The experience of migration has long been a fertile ground for literary expression. In Indian English literature, novels like Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* explore the psychological and physical borders that migrants must navigate. Similarly, in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, the precarious lives of the poor and displaced find vivid representation, resonating deeply with the lived experiences of migrant labourers during the pandemic.

Bapsi Sidhwa's *Ice Candy Man* also illustrates the trauma of displacement and the loss of home and identity, much like the sudden uprooting experienced by migrant workers in 2020. These literary texts offer powerful frameworks to understand the emotional and existential dimensions of forced migration, complementing the raw documentation offered by digital media.

Poetry, too, has responded to the call of crisis. Meena Kandasamy's works, particularly *Ms Militancy*, highlight themes of marginalisation and resistance. Her poetic voice resonates with the desperation and dignity of migrants, offering an aesthetic and political commentary on social injustice.

Mainstream Media vs. Alternative Digital Narratives

1,43,423 newspapers were circulated in India in 2020 (Statista, 2022); out of these, 2,527 newspapers were published in English, while 16,360 newspapers were published in Hindi. In the state of Madhya Pradesh, 5,446 newspapers were in circulation in 2020.

While mainstream media often oscillated between government narratives and crisis coverage, alternative digital media provided space for dissenting voices. Platforms such as The Wire,

Newslaundry and Scroll. in conducted on-ground reports and interviews that challenged the sanitised versions of official policy responses. These platforms helped humanise the statistics, presenting migrant labourers not merely as subjects of pity but as individuals with agency and stories.

For the public and the media, the massive number of internal migrants on India's roads, returning "home," became a spectacle. The question was, why were they returning home? An interview in the Indian Express captured the expressions of the migrants themselves. In its coverage of the city, the Indian Express had, at the top, photographs of three migrant labourers and their weary faces, longing to go home. Upon being asked why he left for home, Sunil Kumar said, "I had to stop working after the lockdown was imposed; it has been very difficult if they extend the lockdown." I cannot remain at the shelter." Ramesh Kumar said, "I tried to return home, but police stopped me due to the lockdown." Though this shelter has been my home for the past year, I need to get back to my family in Jaipur." The migrants emphasized that their definition of home revolved around their family, giving them a sense of protection and care. It came out very clearly that, though forced by economic circumstances to leave their villages, the migrants regarded the urban centres as temporary "shelters" and not homes. The feeling of security, the warmth of care, and the feeling of belongingness were lacking in these temporary shelters, and, therefore, the migrants preferred perilous journeys back home to their villages rather than the horrors of starving to death, untended, in the urban settings. An article in the newspaper by Manvendra Singh emphasized this: "Memories of hunger and fear of dying without care lie behind migrants' long trudge home.

Ethical Considerations and Media Sensationalism

Print and electronic media faced a lot of criticism. These ethical lapses emphasise the need to focus on and revisit the journalistic code of conduct, reiterating the media's role as a guardian of public interest. Moving forward, a deeper theoretical engagement with media ethics, combined with an analysis of global standards and best practices, is essential to ensure that crisis reporting remains both impactful and principled.

Policy Impact and Civil Society Engagement

From Shramik Special trains to emergency ration distribution plans, the media frenzy inspired many policy reactions. Ms. Nirmala Sitharaman, the finance minister, unveiled Tranche 2 of the *Atmanirbhar* package valued at Rs 3.10 lakh crore (1.55% of GDP) on May 14, 2020. It

comprised two months' free food grain supply for migrants. Furthermore, a unique liquidity program is designed to give 50 million street sellers Rs 10,000 working capital of Rs 5,000 crore. Civil society also sprang into action, planning legal support, food distribution campaigns, and housing arrangements. Media thus served as a facilitator of civic involvement as well as a watchdog.

Statistics indicate that nearly 4% of the total migrant population received rations allotted by the Government, while 29% did not receive rations despite having ration cards. Around 90% of the migrants either faced a loss of pay or a reduction in their pay.

Between May 30, 2020, and July 16, 2020, researchers in India surveyed 179 districts to determine how many refugees went hungry during the lockdown. An estimated 35% of the migrants suffered miserably as they did not get a day's meal. A survey published by The Hindu states that 96% of migrant workers did not get rations from the government, and 90% of them did not receive wages during the lockdown.

Crossing Digital Borders: A Global Perspective

The global dissemination of migrant narratives through digital media transcended physical and national boundaries. International human rights organisations cited the Indian migrant crisis in their pandemic reports. Diaspora communities and international NGOS used digital footage to advocate for policy accountability.

Conclusion

The COVID-19 migrant labour problem in India reminds us grimly of the structural inequalities in the nation's socioeconomic fabric. Once the COVID-19 epidemic revealed the extreme vulnerabilities and systematic neglect of the migrant labour populations, digital media became both a mirror and a tremendous amplifier of their suffering. From citizen journalism and visual storytelling to hashtag activism and grassroots reporting, digital platforms gave migrant workers hitherto unheard-of exposure through a range of narrative approaches. These narratives humanized numbers, challenged accepted mainstream wisdom, and motivated sympathy, policy attention, and in some cases, direct help. Still, this visibility was erratic and hardly trouble-free. Sensationalism, selective representation, performative action, and ethical lapses often coloured the portrayal of migrant misery.

Digital media was not only involved in documentation but also advocacy and mobilisation, thereby helping to tell these experiences. The digital stories of the pandemic have greater significance when considered alongside literary works that have long explored themes of migration and displacement. It's time to include both digital and literary narratives in policy frameworks as we negotiate the post-pandemic reality to ensure inclusive recovery solutions that uphold human dignity.

This paper has attempted to study the issues related to migrant labour over time and the crucial role of digital media narratives in capturing and facilitating the migrant experience during the crisis. Future research has to look at this area very poignantly and go beyond the episodic visibility to support structural change and long-lasting unity, which will ensure that not only during crisis, but also migrant labour is to be recognised as a necessary element of national life and dignity.

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