



Bahujan Economists¹
21st June 2021

Struggle Without State

Livelihoods in Lockdown

Bahujan Economists, on 15th June 2021, organised a webinar on the ongoing livelihood crisis faced by marginalized workers and communities due to the state-imposed lockdown. The speakers for the session were - Nitin Lahore (Sanitation Worker, Indore), Surekha and Kamlesh (ASHA Workers, Haryana), Grace Banu (Trans Rights Activist), Sima Kumari (Fellow, Stranded Workers Action Network), Sanjay Sahni (NREGA Union Leader), and Kiran Deshmukh (President, National Network of Sex Workers). The speakers shared the hardships faced by their communities, along with their demands. Finally, an analysis of the current economic crisis, caused by government neglect during the pandemic, was delivered by Dr. Jean Drèze (Visiting Professor, Ranchi University and Professor Emeritus, Delhi School of Economics).

Nitin Lahore highlighted the hardships faced by *Safai Karamcharis* (sanitation workers) in the absence of state support during and before the pandemic. Questioning why *Safai Karamcharis*, despite their vulnerability, were not considered frontline workers, Nitin brought to notice the non-provision of PPE kits. Shedding light on insufficient ration, he stressed that the workers be made permanent employees of the state and remunerated at least Rs 50,000. Highlighting the issue of little social security for dependents, especially children, he demanded that their children should be provided free education. At least 100 children per year should also be given admission in central universities, along with the scope of foreign education.

Surekha and Kamlesh, two ASHA workers from Haryana, reiterated the inadequate PPE kits during both waves of the pandemic. In the first wave, their responsibilities included screening, quarantining, and monitoring individuals with symptoms of COVID but in the second, they had added responsibility to educate and mobilize people for vaccination which were often retorted to with verbal and physical assaults. Surekha highlighted the macro challenges, the systemic impediments- red-tapism- in claiming insurance, which she mentions is their right as they face huge personal risk in conducting their work. Kamlesh sensitised the challenges of tackling misinformation as well as unscientific and communal propaganda about vaccines spread by some ministers of the government in Haryana. She also mentioned that the union is resisting the forced installation of the MDM app which aims to monitor their work. The ASHA workers demanded that they should be made permanent workers in the healthcare system.

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Grace Banu deplored that in times of hardship, the transgender community is often overlooked. The community has had to fight every problem independently. What saddens her, she says, is the lessening of people speaking up for themselves. A meager government provision of Rs 1,500 to members of the community can only be availed upon producing Aadhar card and bank account details which many do not have. Only 0.5% of the members have thus received this provision. The lockdowns proved to be even more cumbersome due to the insufficiency and non-universal nature of the funds.

Sima Kumari and Sanjay Sahni talked about the importance of job guarantee schemes like MGNREGA for workers and highlighted issues faced by migrant workers. The migrant returnees, having been unemployed for over a year with inadequate ration, were forced to dilute their savings for survival. Sanjay also emphasized the state of education in public schools and the impact on children in villages. To reduce casualties, he suggested an immediate increase in the guaranteed employment days from 100 to, at least, 200-250 days and revision of to, at least, Rs 500 per day. Sima reiterated that in Jharkhand, NREGA workers faced payment delays up to 26 days after the completion of work. Calling attention to the essentiality of the scheme, she asked why the Central Govt has cut 35% off of the NREGA budget.

Kiran Deshmukh shared how sex workers as a particularly vulnerable community, disseminated information to the workers using multiple short videos about precautions and safety measures before the lockdown was imposed. Despite the cautious efforts, research conducted by US universities (Harvard and Yale schools of Public Health) accused the community of being a potential super spreader. Many workers returned home following the lockdown and the fear of poverty and unemployment created additional pressure which caused a loss of members who died by suicide. They conducted surveys to find that a majority availed loans from the informal market at the rate of 15% to meet their basic necessities like housing, food, and education. She voiced the demands of the network that sex work be decriminalized and recognized as work. She also argued that the government should legislate that the children of sex workers be granted caste certificates and other official documents in the names of the mothers.

Jean Drèze stressed that the pandemic has exposed the situatedness of caste in this country. Stating public health to be a cooperative enterprise where each citizen has a stake, the pandemic can only be dealt with cooperation at all levels. However, the existing caste prejudice and deliberate instigation of polarities have come in the way of public cooperation and collaboration. Workers have been in crisis for more than a year now. The hangover of the previous lockdown is yet to subside. With reserves running out, the impact could worsen and push the country to mass hunger unless the central government distributes a more comprehensive relief package. Emphasizing the impact on children and education, Jean called for a partial opening of schools to assist children with homework and small group sessions to retain the connection of children to schools.