

DISINGENUOUS AND NO ANTIDOTE

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The [Central government made a claim](#), on the eve of April 1, April Fool's Day, that "fake news" alone is responsible for the untold [misery and loss of life of migrant workers](#) after the [lockdown](#). It is important to examine this in the light of what "fake news" actually means, that is, a report, presented as authoritative, of an event which never actually occurred.

Fake news is a menace not only because it is usually motivated by an intent to deceive and misinform but also because it may induce people to act on the information. This can have grave consequences, especially where the penetration of mobile telephony and social media exceeds that of education and awareness.

Editorial | [Uncritical endorsement: On exodus of migrant workers and the Supreme Court](#)

For many who engage in political discourse, however, "fake news" is used as an epithet to describe any critical comment or opposing viewpoint. By branding criticism as "fake news", governments draw on the consensus that fake news is pernicious, obviating the need to respond to the content of the criticism. If it is fake news, after all, it merits no response. Used in this way, the phrase "fake news" is used as an antidote to any opposition or critique.

Such usage is disingenuous. News reports facts. "Fake news" is a report of facts that are knowingly false, presented as "news". By definition, news is not opinion, which can be wrong, but it cannot be "fake". Therefore, an opinion that you disagree with, cannot be branded as "fake news", because it is just that, opinion. You cannot, by mischaracterising criticism as "fake news", escape from having to respond to it.

Contemporary political discourse has taken this dangerous approach a step further. Where governments are criticised for causing suffering among their people, the suffering is instead attributed to the menace of "fake news". For example, after the precipitous announcement of lockdown, the government has been criticised for failing to anticipate the exodus of migrant workers; failing to make advance provision for food, shelter or salaries; failing to communicate with State governments to formulate a coordinated approach before the lockdown; and failing to communicate with the public regarding what migrant workers should do in view of the lockdown.

Full coverage | [Lockdown displaces lakhs of migrants](#)

The government's response to the mass exodus was, by any yardstick, uncoordinated, where initially there was abject confusion, then the States reportedly provided vehicles to ferry the workers, and, finally, the States were directed to seal their borders. The human loss was incalculable, with hundreds of thousands undertaking Partition-esque journeys across hundreds of kilometres in a desperate bid to return home, leading to the tragic loss of lives and enormous suffering that are yet to be fully documented. The newspapers continue to report that food and shelter are still not reaching many of the migrant workers. These criticisms certainly deserve a response.

Instead of responding, the government, on affidavit to the Supreme Court of India in response to petitions that migrant workers need to be provided for during lockdown, says that the only culprit for the loss of life and hardship of migrant workers is, simply, "fake news". Apparently, the sole reason that migrant workers undertook the punishing journey back home across hundreds of

kilometres back home was “fake news” that the lockdown would extend to three months rather than three weeks. The prospect of three weeks without food, shelter or basic amenities was, according to the government, not devastating enough to motivate workers to return home. Fake news is apparently to blame for upsetting the government’s careful calculation that millions of migrant workers would have serenely stayed put and there would have been no hardship whatsoever.

Also read | [In Bareilly, migrants returning home sprayed with 'disinfectant'](#)

This begs a raft of questions: “Fake news” is a statement that is knowingly false — what was the false statement that constituted “fake news” in this case? Was it the announcement of relief measures for three months by the Finance Minister triggering speculation that the 21-day lockdown could be extended to June 30? Isn’t the government extending the lockdown and isn’t its eventual duration still uncertain? Was extending the lockdown a decision that the government could even have taken on March 24, or would it depend on an assessment of the situation closer to April 14? Could any of us, including the government, categorically have said on March 24 that the lockdown would not be extended, depending on the situation prevailing on April 14? Was the government itself the source of what it is now calling “fake news”?

The government cannot be permitted, by the artifice of “fake news”, to bypass the criticism that it should have planned better, coordinated between Centre and State governments, and been clear in strategy and communication. These are not hindsight criticisms either. Lessons could and should have been learned from deficiencies in similar announcements made earlier by foreign governments regarding COVID-19 measures. Chanting the mantra of “fake news” cannot wish away these questions.

Also read | [Migrant workers in Surat come out on road demanding salaries](#)

The Supreme Court passed an order on March 31 directing the media to carry the official version of events of the pandemic, which the government is to publish on a daily basis. With little to go on other than the government’s fervid assertions that it had taken more than adequate measures in response to COVID-19, the Court perhaps did not want to enter the thicket of whether better government planning and communication could have avoided or reduced the suffering of migrant workers, or whether the source of the so-called “fake news” was the government itself. The Court, fortunately, made clear that it did not intend to stifle discussion of the pandemic, else even this piece could not have been published. If false information circulated on social media is dangerous because it can trigger action, misleading statements or lack of clarity in government messaging is even more dangerous, given the credibility of the source. What “fake news” is not, is a dissenting opinion or a viewpoint the establishment does not like. No government should be permitted to hide behind a vague assertion of “fake news” to abdicate responsibility for its actions. Not even on April Fool’s Day.

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