

# REBUILD CITIES AS SPACES OF DIGNITY

Relevant for: null | Topic: Urbanization, their problems and their remedies incl. Migration & Smart Cities

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The [COVID-19 pandemic](#) has unravelled deep inequalities in how basic services are accessed in urban India. Preventive methods in combating the infection, at an individual level, have highlighted these disparities even more sharply. Consider, for example, the limited access to water. Washing hands for a minimum of 20 seconds is a fundamental in avoiding the infection. However, for migrant labourers without proper dwelling units, this “home-based” precaution is a limiting exercise because of inequitable access to water. The largely informal nature of contract employment under which migrant labourers work exacerbated the crisis during the various phases of the national lockdown. With basic amenities lacking and means of livelihood shrinking, migrant labourers were forced to exit from cities. Thousands of them walked on foot to their villages — some as far as 500 kilometres away – at times, with tragic consequences.

The institutional failings to provide access to basic infrastructure can be seen more clearly in hindsight. In the case of access to water, the recent “Drinking Water, Sanitation, Hygiene and Housing Condition” (2018) survey by the government found that there continue to be glaring gaps in water access in urban and rural India. However, even this survey does not count migrant workers. For example, “floating populations” — a term used to categorise “persons without any normal residence” in the respective state, such as migrant workers — are not considered in the sample data.

Surveys assess access mostly at a household level to provide more “reliable” estimates. The 2018 survey, for example, said that in-house piped water supply is the most used form of access in urban India, thereby ignoring how thousands of people get their water supply. It offered no clues as to how migrants accessed water. There seems to be three possible options on how migrants may have got their water supply. First, migrant labourers are likely to have relied more on public amenities such as hand pumps and public taps or standpipes which are connected to a municipal connection. These sources are generally unreliable — hand pumps and municipal pipes, for example, do not always supply water of potable quality. Second, contractors employing migrant workers may provide them with water access. However, this is purely a voluntary practise. Urban water boards do have a role in providing water to migrants. However, their responsibility towards providing a minimum per capita daily amount is, by and large, geared towards people who are connected to piped water supplies.

The problem is even deeper. There is a huge gap in data about migrants. We do not know how many migrants enter and leave our states and cities. Though the Unorganised Workers Social Security Act 2008 laid down the process of registration — it specified the role of urban local bodies in cities to register migrants and disseminate information regarding schemes and benefits and asked these bodies to disburse “smart cards” for identification — it is apparent that these measures were not obligatory. This was evident from the gap in the data provided by the union labour ministry and various state governments, in the wake of the pandemic, to the Supreme Court on the number of migrants. Offline and online modes have equally failed in gathering this data.

The post pandemic world calls for a new framework of access. As long as migrants remain “invisible” to the state, they will be subject to work in an unsafe work environment. In our current context, this is an impending disaster. Risky work conditions could lead to the resurgence of the virus, unless labourers can take adequate safety precautions at their workplace. Recognition

and identification is the first step towards a more enhanced framework to provide basic amenities. To begin with, a record of migrant workers entering and leaving every city and state is an elementary requirement.

The crisis presents an opportunity to re-examine how our cities are developed on the backs of migrant labour. Along with the responsibility of the state, businesses and contractors employing labourers can be involved in providing access to basic services. The deployment of such measures could be made a requirement for building permits and clearances –violations could attract penalties. The Unorganised Workers Social Security Act hardly puts any responsibility on the contractors and businesses to provide any services. It came as no surprise when most of them neglected the migrant workers during the crisis.

A greater role for businesses is not being idealistic. Rather, such roles are recognised as crucial by the International Labour Organisation. Such measures give central importance to the dignity of labour, they also affirm the dignity of an individual “before” their labour. It may go a long way in building our cities as spaces where access to basic services by the poor is rooted in a language of dignity and rights, not charity and voluntarism.

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