

## **A MOMENT FOR CIVILISATIONAL INTROSPECTION**

**There is a collective culpability in the social crime during the lockdown — of the dispossession of India's working poor**

The traumatic months of the national lockdown lay bare many troubling truths about the profound estrangement of people of privilege from the working poor. They reveal a society in which the privileged are extraordinarily comfortable with inequality, and wanting in elementary empathy and solidarity. They confirm that the veneer of modernity and the progressive, egalitarian values of the Constitution remain — in the prophetic words of Babasaheb Ambedkar — no deeper than a coat of paint.

### **An exile of the poor**

In this writer's book, *Looking Away: Inequality, Prejudice and Indifference in New India*, I described the Indian rich and middle-class to be among the most uncaring in the world, mired still in the cruelties of caste and class, with a singular capacity to look at injustice and suffering and just turn their faces away. I wrote of the exile of the poor from our conscience and our consciousness. The lockdown disclosed precisely how absolute and unforgiving is this exile.

For any young person growing up in middle-class homes, the poor are visible at every turn, but only in their instrumentality as people who exist to service our every need. They never know them as classmates, as colleagues or competitors at work, or as friends in a playground or cinema theatre.

When the COVID-19 infection hit us, we saw the working poor suddenly as dangerous potential spreaders. We wanted them suddenly at bay. We ignored that it was not the poor who endangered us, but we who endangered the poor when they came into contact with us. After all, it was people who could afford flight tickets who brought the novel coronavirus into India.

We welcomed the strategy of a lockdown — possibly, the harshest and largest in the world, with the smallest relief package. We felt safe, locked in our homes. Deprived of domestic help, we were inconvenienced, but adjusted willingly for our own safety. We adjusted also to working from home, secure that our salaries and savings would tide us through. With running water on tap, we washed our hands regularly. We were untroubled because our health insurance would pay for treatment in expensive private hospitals. We grappled with boredom and occasional depression, but it was a time also to rebuild our bonds with our families.

We were indifferent that the lockdown fell like a meteor on the lives of millions of the working poor. They had fully functional lives before, mostly without state support. After possibly some years in poorly resourced schools, they travelled far to escape the dead end poverty and caste oppression of the countryside. The cities were uniformly unwelcoming to them. The state made no arrangements for affordable decent housing or to protect their rights as workers. Instead it was consistently hostile to them, rendering illegal and demolishing their slum shanties or roadside vending. Still, millions of them survived and overcame, working hard to build, clean, maintain and sustain the cities, and raise the lives of their families despite an unjust, uncaring state.

The lockdown by design had nothing to offer them except to destroy overnight the lives they had resiliently built for themselves. After all, the safety of physical distancing and handwashing were impossible for them in their grimy, crowded shanties or rough streets. With their livelihoods bombed out by state policy, in their ruins they were suddenly forced to endure the very hunger they escaped when they had moved to the city. Despite this, we in the middle-classes readily demonstrated our support for the lockdown, cheerily banging utensils or lighting lamps and candles as instructed.

It is sobering to be mindful that most men and women trudging or cycling home in dangerous journeys, dying on railway tracks or of hunger and exhaustion on trains without food and water, are between 15 and 30 years old. But for the accident of their birth, they could instead have been in high school or university, studying online, or working from the safety of their homes, fighting boredom with an overdose of Netflix.

## A bias

The brazen class bias of state policies did not trouble us at all. All government servants and most employees in the formal private sector were secure that they would be paid full salaries under the lockdown. The poor had to make do with slim financial handouts not more than two days' wages, an appeal from the Prime Minister to employers to pay wages, and lining up for hours for cooked meals each day. Being thrust into massive deprivation and forced to survive the indignity of occasional charity seemed in the fitness of things for the poor. It seemed also in the fitness of things that while we could quarantine in the comfort of our homes or in hired hotel rooms, the poor were forced into crowded dormitories with clogged bathrooms and inedible food, which they regarded as jails.

But nowhere was the cruelty of the ruling classes on display more than in the treatment of migrant workers who wished to return home. For people stranded overseas, students in hostels, and pilgrims, the state organised special flights and buses. For migrants, there was first a complete sealing of borders and cancellation of trains and buses. As millions began to trudge or cycle hundreds of kilometres with small children in tow, many dying in accidents or of exhaustion on the way, the government finally announced a small number of trains.

Migrants had to pay, until massive outrage forced a reluctant backtrack. But a complicated maze of bureaucratic requirements were thrust in place. One had to apply online, and also get official clearances. Getting a seat was like a lottery and information came online. Workers without smartphones fell back on the very contractors who had let them down to negotiate them through this tangle. Trains were often cancelled, or rerouted, and there was no food and water along the way. People died of dehydration and hunger while travelling.

Buses were little better. Private enterprise and corruption thrived and migrants were charged thousands even to travel on bus rooftops. After perilous journeys on crowded buses or trucks, packed in ways which could only spread the contagion exponentially, there were instances where several were drenched in unsafe disinfectants. Officials at many checkpoints demanded bribes, and workers sometimes paid more for travel than air tickets. Migrants, until recently providers for family in the village, had to ask them for money to be able to come home, and they mounted vast new debts.

Governments and business did not help them because they did not care, and because they did not want them to move. They did not see them as human beings in their fullness of the agency and humanity, but only as a factor of production, labour which should be obediently available on call whenever they were able to restart their enterprises.

When the Union government finally decided to restore flights, the Minister said that health certificates before travel and quarantine after were not 'practical' (although some State governments insisted on quarantine). But what was deemed not practical for resourced and networked air travellers was made mandatory for pauperised workers without social capital.

This should be a moment for civilisational introspection. In coming months, as hunger spreads, jobs crumble, children are pulled out of school into labour, and poor people die without hospital beds and ventilators, will we acknowledge our collective culpability in the social crime of the radical dispossession of our people, in an ultimately vain bid to keep just ourselves safe? Will we recognize the abject collapse of our moral centre? Will we at last learn lessons of solidarity, equality and justice?

### Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **civilisational** (adjective) – relating to civilisation (culture, customs, way of life).
- ❖ **introspection** (noun) – self-observation, self-analysis; contemplation.
- ❖ **culpability** (noun) – guilt, blame/fault; responsibility.
- ❖ **collective** (adjective) – combined, united/joint, cooperative (by all people as a group).
- ❖ **social crime** (noun) – it represents a conscious challenge (opposition) to a prevailing social order and its values.

- ❖ **dispossession** (noun) – deprivation/ deprivation, privation, eviction, legal ouster.
- ❖ **traumatic** (adjective) – shocking, distressing, disturbing.
- ❖ **lay bare** (phrasal verb) – reveal, expose, disclose.
- ❖ **profound** (adjective) – deep, serious, difficult, intense.
- ❖ **estrangement** (noun) – alienation, isolation, disaffection, turning away, hostility.
- ❖ **privilege** (noun) – (special) advantage, entitlement, right, honour.
- ❖ **the privileged** (noun) – a person who is gifted/ honoured with special advantage, right, entitlement.
- ❖ **wanting** (adjective) – lacking, insufficient, deficient, without.
- ❖ **empathy** (noun) – compassion, sympathy, feeling.
- ❖ **solidarity** (noun) – unity, harmony, mutual support.
- ❖ **veneer** (noun) – (outward) impression, image, posture.
- ❖ **progressive** (adjective) – modern, liberal, forward-thinking.
- ❖ **egalitarian** (adjective) – fair, just, common/equal; supporting social equality.
- ❖ **prophetic** (adjective) – predictive, visionary, far-seeing.
- ❖ **exile** (noun) – separation, banishment, expulsion, eviction.
- ❖ **look away** (phrasal verb) – avert, avoid, turn away, gaze away from someone/ something.
- ❖ **prejudice** (noun) – discrimination, partiality, intolerance, bigotry.
- ❖ **mire in** (verb) – entangle, catch up, involve, mix up.
- ❖ **singular** (adjective) – unique; atypical, strange.
- ❖ **look at** (phrasal verb) – regard, consider, view.
- ❖ **turn away** (phrasal verb) – avoid facing someone/something.
- ❖ **consciousness** (noun) – awareness, knowledge, realization, recognition.
- ❖ **precisely** (adverb) – exactly, absolutely, squarely.
- ❖ **at every turn** (phrase) – repeatedly, all the time, always, continually.
- ❖ **absolute** (adjective) – autocratic, authoritarian, draconian; unrestricted, unrestrained.
- ❖ **unforgiving** (adjective) – harsh, cruel, severe; merciless, uncaring, unsympathetic.
- ❖ **instrumentality** (noun) – mode of expression, means, method.
- ❖ **potential** (adjective) – possible, likely, probable.
- ❖ **at bay** (phrase) – away, off, aside, at a distance.
- ❖ **endanger** (verb) – imperil, jeopardize, risk, put in danger.
- ❖ **deprive of** (verb) – dispossess, strip of, deny, prevent from having.
- ❖ **inconvenience** (verb) – trouble, bother, burden, disturb.
- ❖ **secure** (verb) – get, gain, obtain (something with difficulty).
- ❖ **tide through** (phrasal verb) – tide over, survive, help or support someone in difficulty (particularly by providing money to sustain).
- ❖ **grapple with** (phrasal verb) – tackle/deal, confront, face.
- ❖ **indifferent** (adjective) – unconcerned, careless, uncaring, uninvolved, casual.
- ❖ **oppression** (noun) – persecution, abuse, ill treatment, suppression.
- ❖ **uniformly** (adverb) – evenly, equally.
- ❖ **unwelcoming** (adjective) – unfriendly, unsociable, indifferent.
- ❖ **consistently** (adverb) – always, each time, invariably.
- ❖ **hostile** (noun) – opposed, inimical, averse, unsympathetic.
- ❖ **render** (verb) – make, cause to be, cause to become.
- ❖ **shanty** (noun) – relating to a roughly built hut, shed, shack.
- ❖ **vending** (noun) – trading, selling off something.
- ❖ **unjust** (adjective) – unfair, inequitable, discriminatory, biased.
- ❖ **by design** (phrase) – deliberately, intentionally, purposefully.
- ❖ **resiliently** (adverb) – in a way something that recovers quickly from difficulties.
- ❖ **grimy** (adjective) – stained, polluted/ messy, dusty/uncleaned.

- ❖ **meteor** (noun) – falling star, shooting star.
- ❖ **livelihood** (noun) – means of making a living with the basic necessities (food, water, shelter and clothing); means of support, subsistence, source of income.
- ❖ **bomb out** (verb) – make someone homeless.
- ❖ **in ruins** (phrase) – in disrepair, falling to pieces, ramshackle.
- ❖ **endure** (verb) – undergo, go through, live through, suffer/experience.
- ❖ **readily** (adverb) – without difficulty, without delay, without hesitation, quickly, easily.
- ❖ **sobering** (adjective) – serious/sensible, thoughtful; logical/realistic, pragmatic.
- ❖ **mindful** (adjective) – aware of, conscious of, heedful of.
- ❖ **trudge** (verb) – walk heavily, walk slowly (due to harsh conditions).
- ❖ **exhaustion** (noun) – extreme tiredness, fatigue, weariness, lack of energy.
- ❖ **bias** (noun) – prejudice, partiality; favouritism, unfairness, one-sidedness.
- ❖ **brazen** (adjective) – bold and shameless; unashamed, unabashed.
- ❖ **make do** (phrase) – cope, manage, survive.
- ❖ **handout** (noun) – freebie, aid, subsidy.
- ❖ **thrust** (verb) – force, push, propel.
- ❖ **deprivation** (noun) – poverty, impoverishment, hardship, neediness.
- ❖ **indignity** (noun) – humiliation, insult, offence.
- ❖ **in the fitness of things** (phrase) – suitable, appropriate, proper, fitting.
- ❖ **clogged** (adjective) – filled up, choked, crowded.
- ❖ **inedible** (adjective) – unconsumable, uneatable, indigestible.
- ❖ **on display** (phrase) – noticeable, visible, recognizable, in (public) view.
- ❖ **stranded** (adjective) – stuck (in difficulties), helpless, abandoned, deserted.
- ❖ **pilgrim** (noun) – traveller (going to holy/sacred place for a religious reason).
- ❖ **in tow** (phrase) – accompanying/ following.
- ❖ **outrage** (noun) – indignation, fury, anger, wrath, resentment.
- ❖ **backtrack** (verb) – retract, take back, go back on, disclaim/disavow.
- ❖ **maze** (noun) – complex network, labyrinth, web, tangle,
- ❖ **bureaucratic** (adjective) – institutional, procedural, official/governmental.
- ❖ **in place** (phrase) – established, set up.
- ❖ **fall back on** (phrasal verb) – resort/turn to, use, employ.
- ❖ **let down** (phrasal verb) – abandon, desert, leave, give up, fail to support.
- ❖ **dehydration** (noun) – the loss of too much water in the body.
- ❖ **thrive** (verb) – grow, develop, progress, advance (vigorously).
- ❖ **perilous** (adjective) – dangerous, risky, precarious, insecure, life-threatening.
- ❖ **contagion** (noun) – the spreading of a bad and dangerous idea.
- ❖ **exponentially** (adverb) – rapidly, quickly, swiftly (in relation to an increase of something).
- ❖ **drench** (verb) – wet thoroughly, dampen, moisten, soak, hose down (spray something (disinfectant) with a hose pipe).
- ❖ **mount** (verb) – increase, rise, accumulate, build up.
- ❖ **debt** (noun) – liability, financial obligation, borrowed capital.
- ❖ **fullness** (noun) – completeness, inclusiveness.
- ❖ **human (agency)** (noun) – a person.
- ❖ **humanity** (noun) – humankind, the human race, people.
- ❖ **on call** (phrase) – on duty, on standby, ready, available.
- ❖ **deem** (verb) – regard as, consider; view as.
- ❖ **pauperised** (adjective) – made poor, impoverished, poverty-stricken, penurious.
- ❖ **crumble** (verb) – disintegrate, collapse, break down, fragment.
- ❖ **pull out** (phrasal verb) – withdraw, leave, get out.
- ❖ **radical** (adjective) – thorough, complete; violent, forceful.
- ❖ **vain** (adjective) – futile, useless, pointless.
- ❖ **bid** (noun) – attempt, effort, endeavour/try.
- ❖ **abject** (adverb) – miserable, hopeless, pathetic.