

# What Will India's Elites Do If The Migrants Don't Return?

By: [Rahul Jayaram](#) | 08 May 2020



Patna: Migrant workers from Prayagraj on their way to reach their native places at NH-31 during a nationwide lockdown to curb the spread of coronavirus, in Patna. (PTI Photo)

Regardless of our decades of 'democracy', federalism and local level political devolution, gruesome socioeconomic inequality remains India's most glaring truth and its elimination must be our sole goal. The 'world's largest democracy' cannot, must not, should not, be one of its poorest; if it is, then I'm afraid it's a rip-off democracy. We can make little sense of all this, until we pose an existential query that is integrally conjoined to our concerns: The role of India's '1 percent' and the upper and middle classes. What is their relationship with the idea of money? Why do they hold on to it so much, while masses of human beings they (directly or indirectly) employ remain underfed, exploited, abused, used?

In many ways, the global pandemic has mauled the meaning of money in most parts of the world. The cliché goes that it doesn't see the difference between the rich and the poor. That's a lie, for India's roofless indigent are starving, walking, dying. Indians of means have had the luxury of sticking to stay home, physically distance, wash their hands with soap often, eat food. Though many of the poor are likely to have voted for the current prime minister twice and banged plates in honour of health workers, they have defied the writ of the government to avoid death by hunger and unemployment before falling to the coronavirus. (In different circumstances, such defiance may even be considered 'anti-national' by the you-know-whos of India today.)

The money that the poor live and work for is for everyday subsistence. The psychological meaning of economic security is redefined each day to them. They may be called daily wage labourers, but as the current predicament instructs us, they nary get paid every day. Almost every such person has many mouths to feed or money to send back home. Our middle and certainly the upper middle class 1 percenters are insulated from such manmade travails. Their class extends them more breathing space. Suchlike Indians venerate the stock markets (that have

crashed), the income tax saving Systematic Investment Plans (that have tanked), mutual funds (that are in the doldrums). An Oxfam India report in 2017 concluded that 1% of India's 1.3 billion citizens accounts for 73% of its wealth and the bottom-most tier's growth was less than 1% in that time. The horror, the horror. Do such things happen overnight? Aren't their riches created through deliberation and policy?

The salaried middle class has been sold a set of aspirations, that tempts them to invest in dubious companies or buy overrated and substandard flats on inflated down payments and ever-spiralling equated monthly instalments. The consumerism devalues money and dehumanizes people who have lesser material benefits in comparison. Organized religion purports to imbue 'values' into these communities. But one aspect of it glorifies a gluttonous materialism. Festivals like Akhsaya Tiritiya, have only recently been transmogrified into a gold-and-silver feeding frenzy. Cultural decadence like these have dissipated the middle-class's predisposition towards charitability and made it look away from the morass within its eye-span and within itself. The post-1991 reforms that spring-boarded the lower middle class to the middle class, or the middle class to the upper middle class, forgets the privations it may have witnessed in the beginning. Such difficulty, one assumes, makes one care for where one comes from, for one's provenance. It doesn't seem to be true in the case of India's middle classes or elites. Not yet. Some of our rich philanthropists are indeed outliers in our environment.

How did the stockbroker, the money manager, the hedge fund runner, become more influential and powerful than majority workers who have sweated, bled, toiled to set the foundations for current-day India? How did we get to such a moral pass where labourers, masons, helps, helpers, and doctors, the foot-soldiers of our fight, don't register on our consciousness and timelines till calamity time?

Consumerist aspiration and greed are drivers of our collective blindness. And thus, there is immense acceptability for the generational exploitation of majority Indians by a set of people. These have been perpetuated in our lives everyday over generations. They are normalized. India's poor suffers because better off India wants them to be kept in pain, in chains. Few of this class will say so, but India is a sadistic class-divided society, where the better-off want to keep the poor in their position.

Commenting on the nature of the Indian middle-class attitude towards India's poor way back in 1980, poet and writer Dom Moraes wrote, "India had the most brutally stupid middle-class in the world". One can look away from the carcass of one's civilization, when one is trained, taught, to look away. It doesn't occur without eliding our moral filter. The great Indian middle class that aspires for the best private education for its children, the best international holiday for the family, the best restaurant for the upcoming weekend, the best coaching class, has aided in the blanking away of our slogging poor. The conceit of the 'gated society' stretches to many walks of the middle-class life. One wonders what must go on in the minds, hearts, souls of India's one percenters. Do they ever feel any remorse about their presence in our society? Do they ever wonder what their wealth is for? How much is enough in the dire straits of South Asia? What must it feel to be super rich in a super poor country? How can an Antilia even exist in Bombay? What must be the conscience of its owners?

The rich may say, they pay taxes and it's the government's job to take care of all citizens. But that is a specious argument for they have lobbying power. The big business-government nexus accrues them disproportionate leverage in our polity. The majority doesn't have such access or resources. Our great tragedy is that despite our Constitution, affirmative action legislation, and other acts haven't changed our collective consciousness. Our inequality-enabling customs won't get dented till the psyche of the 1 percent is pricked and they are forced to part with their concrete and intangible social advantages. It will mean our political class, which itself is very rich, will have to work to dislodge its own benefits. We will either need a sudden spurt in the representation of the poor in our politics or our political and economic elites to display sacrifice and fair play to work in smashing away their own advantages and redistribute them through political processes. Given their past and present behaviour, there is little chance for the latter to happen. But it's likely our poor will soon find their collective agency to not return from their villages. What will our 1 percent and the rest of the elites do then?

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