

## Essay

# On the Spectacle of Walking

## The Migrant Worker and the Mobility Regime

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Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, in the face of the 21-day nation-wide lockdown imposed in India since 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2020, the migrant worker has become a focal point of public discourse. With all forms of public transport being cancelled and the inter-state borders sealed for public transportation, thousands of migrant workers -- particularly those from the national capital of New Delhi -- are literally walking hundreds of miles to travel to their homes. 'If they receive no succour', warns Sainath (2020), 'their rapidly diminishing access to food and water could trigger a catastrophe. They might fall to age-old diseases like diarrhoea, cholera, and others.' Some are carrying their infants with them. Without a penny or food, some are even dying from the excruciating pain of their treks. Thus, '[a]n immobility regime dominates now...[y]et, the same regime has generated an extreme mobility' (Nayar, 2020: E1) in India. This has suddenly rendered the otherwise invisible migrant worker poignantly 'visible'. Images of the migrants walking are everywhere. They are on the news, social media feeds, and being meme-fied, while their 'extreme mobility' has already become the subject of academic scrutiny. This piece is a brief response to the optics of imagery: how the walk of the migrant workers is visibilized with reference to the so-called mobility regime.

'If they do not move', Bauman (1998: 87) writes about the vagabond, 'it is often the site that is pulled from under their feet'. Today, the site from under the feet of the migrant workers has been pulled, and their unprecedented walk has become quite a sight – a spectacle. Until now, they have survived as an invisible entity in the statist register precisely because of their lives as migrant workers:

When they become eligible to get a voter ID [age of 18], their work life is at its peak and their trips to home short in duration [read: less frequent]. Many migrants...[do] not have the time to get their voter IDs made. Some...have their names in the voter

list but did not have a proof by way of an ID card (Aajeevika, 2016: 5).

The state only has fuzzy figures on their number but no clear documentation on the migrant workers. Besides exposing the state's underpreparedness – or more appropriately, negligence – to deal with a section of its unenumerated/unenumerable population, the spectacle of walking has unfolded before us as a form of what Debord (2016) calls a 'detournement', wherein capitalist rendition of images is being turned against capitalism.

The metaphor of walking is entirely at odds with the capitalist framework of modernity. It denotes an act of slowing down, in contrast to capitalism's politics of speed (Virilio, 2006). Curiously, the metaphor finds expression in two divergent articulations. On the one hand, it invokes an ethos of sublimity when we associate, sometimes dubiously, the Romantic poets and philosophers like Kant and Rousseau with the aesthetics of walking (Solnit, 2001)<sup>1</sup>. On the other hand, a sense of rejection of the bourgeois modernity when the *flâneur* or Gandhi, for example, has taken to walking. In either case, walking becomes a conduit for *doing something else*, for achieving an alternative utopia. The migrant worker's walk does not fit into this cultural signification. It does not seek to *do something else*. In that sense, it is very frontal, which is then transposed onto the images.

Consider the image below. This image is subtle and yet illustrative of the nature of frontality. The image neither 'captures' the migrant nor the walk. All it shows is a bruised foot in focus, with the other foot out of the depth of field. Covering a reasonably large print-space in the front page of a leading daily, positioned at the top-center, it imbricates three other news items, with a common caption: 'Not the time to let nerves snap'. Clearly, this is evocative. It 'enlarge[s] our notions of what is worth looking at...[our] ethics of seeing' (Sontag, 1977: 18). The frontality provokes one to intervene. This is however not to say that the image presents before us some kind of photographic 'transparency' through which one can now access the 'reality'. Instead, it underscores how the production and dissemination of images are already constitutive of intervention, 'by selecting, cropping, excluding... making pictorial choices...by enhancing, suppressing...and, finally, by adding captions and other contextual elements to their image to anchor some potential meanings' (Batchen, 1994: 48). This graphic intervention renders the images frontal; not in the sense that the subject of the image faces us (in fact, it does not in the context of the image below), but rather in their intent of addressal.

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<sup>1</sup> At least two pedestrian trails, both known as 'The Philosopher's Walk' – one along a cherry-tree-lined canal in Kyoto, Japan, and another overlooking the river Neckar in Heidelberg, Germany – are reminiscent of the solitude and sublimity in question, ideally to be derived from walking.

# Not the time to let nerves snap

### Cases begin to rise in country

### Thou shalt snoop on thy neighbour and squeal

**G.S. MUDUR**

New Delhi: India's count of coronavirus patients grew by 227 — the highest so far in 24 hours — on Monday but the health ministry stonewalled queries on the locations of the outbreak's "hotspots" and contradicted suggestions by government researchers that the virus is spreading within the community.

Public health experts and virologists tracking the country's response to the pandemic said the decision not to immediately disclose the hotspot locations could be justified, but the health ministry's denial of community transmission reflected a self-imposed, needless trap.

"It is not in any way an indictment of the government if community transmission has

**IMRAN AHMED SIDDIQUI**

New Delhi: Delhi police have asked residents' welfare associations to spy and report on people stepping out for morning or evening walks, or even moving about on the compound, attracting charges of trying to create a "police state".

The advisory, which asks the RWAs to go through CCTV footage to identify those violating the lockdown, says people with valid reasons to step out will not face action.

But since the advisory specifically mentions only "medical emergencies" in this context, many social media users have been asking whether those going out to buy groceries will be seen as defaulters too.

Mostly, the advisory — issued only in Dwarka, southwest Delhi, so far but about to



An injured foot of a daily wage labourer is seen as he rests on way to his village on the outskirts of Allahabad on Monday following the lockdown. (AP)



Footage shows the migrants being sprayed in Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh.

## Migrants sprayed with chemical

**PIYUSH SRIVASTAVA AND PTI**

Someone is heard telling them to shut their eyes as the spraying begins. Several people in the group complained of a burning sensation in the eyes.

The disinfectant, a sodium hypochlorite solution, is often used to keep swimming pools sanitised.

As a row erupted with Priyanka Gandhi Vadra, Akhilesh Yadav and Mayawati condemning the action, district magistrate Nitish Kumar blamed "overzealous" personnel and said action was being taken against them.

Videos show migrant workers and their families, including women and children, who had arrived on a bus from Delhi squatting at Bareilly's Satellite bus station while men in protective suits hose them down.

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Image retrieved from the front page of The Telegraph's 31 March 2020 edition.

The walk has come to embody a fundamental enunciative paradox. The migrant worker, whose mobility is otherwise restricted, is now walking at a time when, ironically, everyone else must be immobile. This frontality immanent in the images of mobility disturbs our spectatorial passivity. From within the framework of liberal economy, all mobilities are tailored to fit into the prevailing 'episteme'; a taxonomy that allows the mobility of the migrant worker to be situated and recognized as degenerative, against that of the affluent 'voluntary traveler', such as the tourist or nomadic businessman, — whose mobility is virtuous, thereby creating a cultural polarity based on capitalistic implications. Today, the migrant worker's walk is rendered more visible because the purportedly free-willed traveler cannot travel. The spectacle of walking thus underscores the limitations of bourgeois volition. 'Voluntary travel', even for those who have the resources for it, is only conditionally voluntary. Neo-liberal capitalism notionally promotes 'free will', although the 'free-willed' traveler is only allowed to choose from within the options capitalism and the statist directives available for her<sup>2</sup>. This provides an illusion of freedom among travelers, what Korstanje (2018) calls the 'mobilities paradox'. In laying bare this false sense of 'free will', the harrowing images of the walk have become the nodal point where our conscience meets the migrant worker who is, both literally and figuratively, socially distant.

Unfortunately, in practice, the state cares little about these workers on whose productivity quotient it thrives. Those of us who enjoy meat tend to turn our eyes

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for example, one requires obtaining a visa to enter certain countries, or cannot 'lawfully' consume alcohol where alcohol is banned.

away when the animal is being slaughtered or try not to think about it in too much detail. We wish we did not witness the act of slaughtering. We wish we did not know about animal slaughtering, but we enjoy the meat anyway despite our knowledge. Likewise, for the moment, we want to turn our eyes away from these images that are garnering powerful *affect*. Arguably, we have *always* known about them, yet we gladly fall back on the labour power of the workers – maids, drivers, masons, carpenters etc. – in our everyday lives, and will likely do so again once the pandemic is abated. The migrant worker was hitherto situated outside of the statist register. She was hidden from our view; her mobility obscure and alien to the ‘acceptable’ practices of mobility. Now, in forced defiance of the lockdown, she consciously visibilizes her mobility – she enacts her volition to walk in the face of the choicelessness the state has thrown her into.

This is not to ascribe a homogenizing character to the (Indian) states. I am aware that all states do not treat the migrant similarly, and the statist discourses in India must be understood with reference to the nuances of the political dynamics prevalent in the states in question. For example, as of 28<sup>th</sup> March, the Left-Front-governed Kerala—which is always a notable outlier in health achievements in India—has built 4,603 camps sheltering 144,145 migrant workers, 44 camps for the destitute and homeless, and opened community kitchens across the state to serve free meals to those in need (Prashad, 2020). This is exemplary, but it is not how one would imagine the migrants to have been treated in/by states like UP or Bihar, steeped in caste politics; or, for that matter, Maharashtra, a state that has historically been very sensitive about the ‘outsider’ question. Yengde (2020) suggests that among ‘the 395 million intra-state migrants in India, 62 million are estimated to be Dalits and 31 million Adivasis’. These people may be assumed to be more vulnerable because their compulsion to migrate outweighs their intent of upward social mobility, and therefore may account for most of those who are now reverse migrating in the context of the COVID crisis. In fact, Jean Dreze has already expressed concern: ‘Bihar is the biggest worry in the next couple of months... [b]eing a caste and class-ridden society’ (Dreze & Nair, 2020).

Even while recognizing these nuances, one must acknowledge that the images of the migrant workers have generated powerful *affective* responses that cut across states, cultures, and viewers, heterogeneous as they are. As migration becomes normative and mobility continues to remain largely a privilege, the aesthetics and afterlives of the images propose a new visual paradigm, not least because they pierce our spectatorial passivity. As vivid reminders of the plight, poverty, inhospitality, and restrictions to mobility associated with forced migrations, the visual register of the images, indeed paradoxically, renders the migrants *actants* and the immobile elite travelers as *affective* spectators. Accordingly, the migrants are *affecting*, while the figure of the spectator—and by extension, the academic as interpreter—are being *affected*, and rendered ignorant, docile and passive as Ranciere (2010) imagines. The phenomenon of visibilizing, what I call ‘spectacle’, is thus fraught with a role reversal that inverts the traditional roles, personas, and exercise of power of the elite traveler.

In the wake of the so-called ‘urban turn’ (Prakash, 2009), the city-space is increasingly being imagined as mappable, griddable and segregable. In the face of this, the migrant worker’s walk blurs the actant and the affected, the visible and the invisible, the symbolic and the real, the acceptable and unacceptable forms of mobility. It illustrates what Graham and Marvin (2001) call ‘splintering urbanism’. The images have acquired symbolic meaning because they just do not *show* the plight of the migrant worker; they *evoke* (refer to the image above) what has been invisibilized from ‘city-making’ (Schiller & Caglar, 2018). For us, the viewers, the optics of visibilization serves as a site of transformation: the transformation of the sight of the walk from an obscure, yet lived, memory into a documentary apparatus. Memory is to remembering what documentation is to storage. As the images go viral, making news and memes, and as we continue to academicize the topic (perhaps too quickly<sup>3</sup>), what escapes the ‘cultural reproduction’ is rendered spectral – the migrant worker haunting the regime of mobility.

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<sup>3</sup> Consider, Nayar’s (2020) paper on the walk was published on 29 March 2020, within a week of the lockdown and before most of the migrants had actually reached their destination. This perforce has ethical implications, for Nayar writes about the nature of the *walk* – as opposed to this piece on the *capacity* of the images to generate *affect* -, which was, at the time of writing, still an ongoing process involving vulnerable human subjects.

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