Impact of Covid on the lives of Commoners

A tale of how the pandemic upturned the life of a migrant worker and his family.

No life has been left untouched by the Covid-19 Lockdown 1.0 and Lockdown 2.0 have brought major instability in the lives of people.

The ones who bore the biggest brunt of Covid-19 were the marginalized and vulnerable section of the society

A case in point is Mohd. Sarfaraz. A tyre mechanic by profession, Sarfaraz runs his own repair shop in the Shalimar Bagh area of north Delhi. He is thirty-seven years old and hails from Vaishali district in Bihar.

Living in Delhi since 2011, it has been almost three years since he last visited his village and met his parents. Before opening the shop five years back, he used to work in a bread manufacturing factory as a daily wager.

“A daily wage of Rs 300 proved quite low when I worked in the bread factory,” said Sarfaraz, when I met him at Shalimar Bagh.

Sarfaraz stays with his family of four in a single-room rented accommodation, paying 5,000 rupees per month, and is the only earning member in the family. He says his daughter and son are the twinkle of his eyes and their education took a blow when classes started running online. They study at a local government school in Shalimar Bagh only

Since they had only a single smartphone, he was compelled to buy another Android smart-phone. Their misery didn’t end here, as regular access to the internet was another hindrance they have been facing even till date.

When asked how his family was affected during the pandemic, Sarfaraz recalled how they had to slash the monthly budget to make both ends meet.

“Where we used to spend Rs 50, we now spend Rs 10,” he claimed, referring to the rising inflation.

Sarfaraz had to even cut down on the amount he used to send back home to his aged parents. Earlier he used to send around 8,000-10,000 rupees to his parents but couldn't manage sending the same amount as the lockdown slowed business.

His work was greatly hampered during Lockdown 1.0. During Lockdown 2.0, he used to open the shop for a few hours as per local guidelines.

Sarfaraz claimed that since the easing of lockdown restrictions, his business has been slowly bouncing back, with a rise in the number of customers.

"Almost everybody has a car, so with the unlock down our work has been going on smoothly," said Sarfaraz.

On being asked about any assistance from the government, he looked dismayed.

He remembered how he had to return with disappointment thrice before he got the ration kit (15kgs wheat, 5kgs refined oil and a kg of rice upon his fourth visit.

He said it was the Delhi government's ration distribution initiative that was an essential step but it lacked proper planning and implementation. Sarfaraz said that he went again in search of ration kits in June 2021 after the second Covid-19 wave but returned empty-handed.

"The lockdown forced us to eat one meal once in a day from two meals a day before," he said.

Sarfaraz recalled another horrific instance that his family had to go through—on August 2020, he and his children fell sick.

Down to bed rest, he couldn't even come to work. Due to his plight he had to borrow a sum of rupees 15,000 on an interest rate of two percent.

"Returning the loan would be a huge task along with the calculated interest," recalls Sarfaraz.

It reminded him that he wanted to return to Vaishali but the lack of transportation arrangements by the government made it impossible for him and his family to return to their native place. Public transportation was in shambles during the reverse migration.

Another reason was the risk of getting affected from Covid-19. Many videos surfaced, one being of the Anand Vihar Bus Terminal in Noida, where hordes of unsettled and uninformed migrants gathered who had lost hope of returning to their hometowns.

Sarfaraz also cited the example of one of his colleagues, Brijesh, who had to walk a massive distance of nearly 400 kilometers to reach Jhansi, his hometown. It took him 17 days, Brijesh affirms, standing on the side.

“In 2020, 11 of my friends took lifts in buses and trucks to reach their villages,” Sarfaraz recalled.

He looks grim when he recalls the harassment faced from his landlord during the lockdown, which only made things harder for Sarfaraz.

With the responsibility of his family and parents on his shoulders, Sarfaraz had to again resume work in the bread factory he worked in previously.

“I thought of changing my profession but got no other work,” he recalled.

We shifted our discussion to the mental stress the pandemic has caused. Sarfaraz nodded, saying that he had to deal with a great amount of mental stress. He tried coping up by diverting his attention to music and YouTube videos. Sometimes silence was his only companion in these hard times.

Sarfaraz laments that many people lost their lives in this major health crisis. He fears that with the arrival of the third wave will again bring with it uncertainty and hardship.

Though he and his family have taken the first shot of the Covi shield vaccine, there is no concrete information about the second dose.

Do hospitals have enough beds? What will happen to work in case of another lockdown? How will he feed his family then? Such questions keep circling his mind throughout the day.

But immersed in his work and carrying a benevolent smile on his face, he is happy that he will be finally going to his village in Vaishali and his wait to meet his parents will come to an end.