

Social Devastation and Despair. How Coronavirus Threatens India

By [Arundhati Roy](#)

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Below are selected excerpts from Arundhati Roy's article

As an appalled world watched, India revealed herself in all her shame — her brutal, structural, social and economic inequality, her callous indifference to suffering. The lockdown worked like a chemical experiment that suddenly illuminated hidden things.

As shops, restaurants, factories and the construction industry shut down, as the wealthy and the middle classes enclosed themselves in gated colonies, our towns and megacities began to extrude their working-class citizens — their migrant workers — like so much unwanted accrual.

Many driven out by their employers and landlords, millions of impoverished, hungry, thirsty people, young and old, men, women, children, sick people, blind people, disabled people, with nowhere else to go, with no public transport in sight, began a long march home to their villages.

They walked for days, towards Badaun, Agra, Azamgarh, Aligarh, Lucknow, Gorakhpur — hundreds of kilometres away. Some died on the way.

They knew they were going home potentially to slow starvation.

As they walked, some were beaten brutally and humiliated by the police, who were charged with strictly enforcing the curfew.

A few days later, worried that the fleeing population would spread the virus to villages, the government sealed state borders even for walkers. People who had been walking for days were stopped and forced to return to camps in the cities they had just been forced to leave.

Among older people it evoked memories of the population transfer of 1947, when India was divided and Pakistan was born.

Except that this current exodus was driven by class divisions, not religion.

Even still, these were not India's poorest people. These were people who had (at least until now) work in the city and homes to return to.

The jobless, the homeless and the despairing remained where they were, in the cities as well as the countryside, where deep distress was growing long before this tragedy occurred. All through these horrible days, the home affairs minister Amit Shah remained absent from

public view. (Arundati Roy, [FT.com](#), April 3, 2020)

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