



## **Lockdowns, Social Distancing and Working from Home: A View from the Underside**

**Deenabandhu Manchala**  
Area Executive for Southern Asia

In just over two months, coronavirus has turned the world upside down, forcing us to accept many unsettling realities and to deviate from familiar paths and pursuits. With numbers rising daily all over the world, and with vaccine and drugs several months away, the journey ahead is likely to be long and hard.

Coronavirus doesn't discriminate against anyone –rich or poor, young or old, powerful or disempowered. Lockdowns, social distancing, work from home, washing hands, etc., are prescribed to slow the spread, with the assumption that all have the possibilities to comply. Not so for many in the world with scarce access to water, sanitation and healthcare. Although coronavirus doesn't discriminate, social injustice does.

The sudden 21-day lockdown announced by the Indian government on March 24 forced millions of migrant workers in cities to move back to their villages in less than 24 hours. With bus and train services suspended, workers walked hundreds of miles – starving, falling sick and dying along the way – in order to obey the call to play their part in stopping the spread of coronavirus. Ironically, there have never been lockdowns to stop the viruses of social injustice, poverty and exploitation that have kept these same workers incapacitated for generations.

While it may be possible for the wealthy and powerful to build walls around themselves for social distance, the poor in India can only afford to live in densely populated areas, often with six or more people sharing one room. 'Social distancing' sounds like an insult for those victimized by cultures of domination and discrimination, in which classism, casteism and racism sanctified social distance to guarantee privilege for a few.

Similarly, the solution of "work from home" exposes an assumption that everyone has a desk job and that all have the luxury to work from home. What about those who do not have homes, or those whose homes are under flyovers, on pavements and in crowded slum areas? What about those whose lives depend on public activity – street vendors, skilled and unskilled workers, security guards, barbers, cooks, waitstaff, transportation workers, domestic helps, and many others? Relying solely on income through daily hard work, most of these do not

have pensions, sick leave, paid leave, insurance, or bank accounts. How does this mantra work in their case, and for how long?

Millions of local, unorganized, daily wage workers are being put through horrendous suffering in order to “bend the curve” for the world – even though the world has never bothered to “close the gap” for them. Such callous insensitivity towards their conditions, needs and rights for the sake of the larger whole is nothing but a subtle exploitation of the poor to rescue the rich from the pandemic.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deenabandhu Manchala, Area Executive for Southern Asia for the United Church of Christ.

**LEARN** [ucc.org/justice](http://ucc.org/justice)

**DONATE** [ucc.org/donate](http://ucc.org/donate)

ARCHIVE  
**WFJ** [bit.ly/witness4justice](http://bit.ly/witness4justice)

*The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.*