

Bheed: The plight of India's migrant workers during the COVID-19 lockdown

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Bheed, which means crowd, is an Indian Hindi-language social drama written, directed and produced by Anubhav Sinha—*Dus* [2005], *Ra.One* [2011], *Mulk* [2018], *Article 15* [2019], *Thappad* [2020])—and originally released in 2023. It is currently streaming on Netflix.

Starring well-known Bollywood actors, the almost two-hour black-and-white feature exposes some of the nightmarish difficulties and tragedies suffered by the Indian masses after the Modi government suddenly imposed a national COVID-19 lockdown in late March 2020. Sinha's film uses some of the real incidents that occurred during the lockdown to provide a fictionalised and compassionate glimpse into the consequences of the Modi government response to the deadly virus.

The 21-day lockdown resulted in hundreds of millions of people who had migrated from poverty-stricken rural villages and small towns to work in India's industrial cities suddenly thrown out of their jobs and unable to buy food or send money back to their home villages. So stark were their choices that several workers told the media at the time that they would rather die from COVID-19 than from starvation.

Modi's lockdown involved the mass shutdown of railway and bus passenger services with police directed to erect roadblocks and other barriers and, if necessary, to use physical violence to stop people crossing into other states.

These actions, and the government's failure to introduce mass testing, contact tracing and other basic coronavirus safety measures or provide financial support, saw millions of poverty-stricken workers attempting to walk back to their distant hometowns and villages. Hundreds, and perhaps thousands, of internal migrants perished from starvation, dehydration and

exhaustion trying to return home.

Media reports described it as the largest internal migration since the communal division of the subcontinent in 1947 and the creation of a Muslim Pakistan and a nominally secular India.

Sinha's film begins with a group of exhausted migrant workers and their families walking along a railway line to avoid police blockades. The lines provided the shortest route to their villages.

After sharing a tiny meal, they lay down to sleep on the tracks—unaware that goods trains were still operating—with predictable and catastrophic consequences. According to official figures, 8,733 migrant workers were killed and more than 800 injured in 2020 after being hit by trains during the lockdown.

Bheed then introduces its main protagonist, Surya Kumar Tikas (Rajkummar Rao), a young police officer from a low-caste background. He and Renu Sharma (Bhumi Pednekar), who is studying medicine and from an upper-caste family, are in love. Renu's family is hostile to the relationship. Surya Kumar's father, in fact has changed his last name from Tikas to Singh, to hide his low-caste background.

An early scene reveals something of the harsh reality of caste discrimination in India's villages. One of Tikas' relatives has been severely beaten by local authorities for daring to drink from a hand-pump in the village temple, something which is forbidden for the lower castes. Tikas, along with Police Inspector Shiv Yadav (Ashutosh Rana), arrive by jeep and free the man who had been tied up to a pole.

Bheed then shifts to a police barricade erected at the Tejpur border, about 1,200 kilometres from Delhi, where the rest of the movie is set. Tikas, who has just been promoted, is put in charge of the hastily erected border barricade, with orders to block anyone trying to

cross.

The young policeman is quickly confronted with an ocean of people. Some arrive on foot, many of them dragging their belongings on crude carts, others travel on tricycles, bullock carts, tractors, or on buses, cars and trucks. Blocked by the police, they spread out on nearby land in front of the newly created artificial state border. In one of the movie's most compelling moments, the camera pans across this bleak landscape, highlighting the desperate situation facing the migrant workers.

Others arriving at the scene include a television journalist and her camera crew, and a chauffeur-driven wealthy woman determined to get across the border because she is involved in a child custody battle with her former husband.

An unnamed teenage girl transporting her sick and generally uncontrollable alcoholic father on her bicycle also reaches the border. They are survivors of the previous rail tragedy. Tikas's girlfriend also shows up on her motorbike and establishes a makeshift medical camp to assist.

Balram Trivedi (Pankaj Kapur), another key character in the film, comes into prominence at the police checkpoint. Having previously worked as a building security guard, he has organised a busload of other watchmen's families. A charismatic and sometimes arrogant individual, he is keenly aware of his "superiority" as a member of the Brahmin caste.

When Muslim passengers from another bus offer food to crying children on Trivedi's bus, he rejects their generosity, accusing them of spreading the virus, which, in the original version of the movie, he describes as "Corona Jihad."

The word "jihad," was cut in the final release of *Bheed*, following directives from Indian censors. In fact, the anti-Muslim "Corona Jihad" smear, was first made by a senior BJP leader and taken up by other Hindu fundamentalists when COVID-19 hit India. The censor's cut was aimed at deflecting attention from the Hindu fundamentalists and their communalist responses to every crisis.

Indian censors, anxious not to remind audiences of the Modi government's responsibility for the catastrophe, cut all references to the prime minister—direct and indirect—from the film. No serious health measures were adopted by the government to

stop the deadly virus and, by the end April, when the lockdown was lifted, India quickly rose to be one of the countries most impacted by the virus. Some scenes portraying brutal police attacks on migrant workers were also eliminated. Such attacks, however, were numerous during the 2020 lockdown.

With no access to food, the plight of the migrants and their children worsening, Trivedi and a few of his compatriots decide to return to the checkpoint and beg Tikas to let them get some food from a nearby but closed-down mall on the other side of the border. He and his companions are beaten by the police and pushed back behind the barricades.

Later, Trivedi confronts the police again, grabs a rifle from a policeman and somehow single-handedly overpowers a contingent of armed police and enters the mall. These scenes and the film's ending, which follow negotiations and a peaceful reconciliation between Tikas and the armed Trivedi in the shopping mall, are not convincing.

While *Bheed* is underpinned by a healthy hatred for class privileges and repressive caste divisions it tends to present caste identity, not class, as the dominant and the principal regulating factor in Indian social relations. Class is certainly not ignored in the film, but its characters are almost entirely preoccupied by their caste identities.

This is an exaggerated aspect of the film and one that ignores the reality of growing mass actions by Indian workers that year, including a multi-million strong national general strike in January just before the lockdown, that powerfully cut across religious-sectarian, ethnic and caste divides.

Despite these issues, Sinha's film is a sincere exposure of the mass suffering of Indian migrant workers and other oppressed layers, and sharply at odds with hundreds of mindless action stories and other glossy entertainments churned out each year by Bollywood studios. The film deserves a wide audience.



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