

India: How the Lockdown Drove a Workforce on the Margins to Further Alienation

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An incisive report highlights how a substantial workforce of 139 million internal migrant workers, invisible to the system, has been the hardest hit post-lockdown. Further, it lists the urgent measures needed to ensure a safe and dignified existence for migrant communities.

In the first few days of the nationwide lockdown imposed in India to deal with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was one recurring image that burst through the television screens in all its starkness - an unending procession of migrant workers deprived overnight of work, shelter and money, marooned in cities, facing hunger and health risks; and leaving the city to go to their villages.

Trudging long distances with their families - men carrying young children on their shoulders, the women with their meagre belongings hoisted on their heads - for all bus and train services stood cancelled. Going without food for long stretches, often risking the ire of policemen who preferred to speak through their lathis, with no relief in sight, they have been reduced to the status of detritus.

And even though Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman announced an economic package for the poor and migrant populations and various state governments also announced relief measures, in reality there is scant relief for internal migrant workers. Although they comprise a substantial segment of the workforce - 139 million people, no less - they are invisible to the system. Left out of the equation, internal migrant workers are the hardest hit in the current lockdown situation, states a sharply articulated document brought out by the Udaipur-based public service initiative, Aajeevika Bureau, and the collective, Working People's Charter.

The 'Charter of demands for internal migrant workers during COVID-19 pandemic' describes in detail the extent to which the existing vulnerabilities of the "poorest and most vulnerable economic categories in the country" have been exacerbated.

More than that, it sets out the measures urgently needed to ensure "safe and dignified lives for migrant communities in the wake of the pandemic" - measures to be taken in urban and industrial areas where migrants work and in rural, migrant-sending areas and, importantly, measures that the central government needs to take.

The text of the document has been reproduced below.

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Charter of Demands for Internal Migrant Workers during Covid-19 pandemic

Amidst the grave challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, internal migrant workers who move

from rural to urban areas to seek employment have been the hardest hit. While various state governments have announced relief packages, and Union Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman has announced an economic package to benefit poor and migrant populations, they continue to leave out this substantial group of the workforce - accounting for 139 million people!

These measures are restricted to beneficiaries under existing schemes, which do not include migrants who are unable to get themselves registered, or those with identity or domicile documentation, which migrants do not possess in the cities where they work.

Coming from the most socially marginalised groups - including Scheduled Tribes and Castes, OBCs and Muslims - internal migrants also comprise the poorest and most vulnerable economic categories in the country. A nationwide lockdown, and physical distancing measures, form the central strategy for preventing the pandemic from spreading in India. For migrant workers, this means a loss of job and wages as their workplaces shut down. As casual or daily wage labour, they do not have fixed employers in order to demand paid leave. Even where they have been working in the same establishment for many years, they do not have formal employment contracts to prove their status as workers.

At the same time, they fall outside the purview of public provisioning systems in the states that they work in. Without identity cards, which establish their domicile in the destination state, internal migrant workers are unable to access food, water, sanitation, healthcare or housing. Rather, they resort to living in highly informal and un-recognised settlements, including open spaces (such as on pavements, near railway tracks or on public/private lands), in informal rental accommodation which are often congested and unhygienic, or within their worksites (on construction sites, in factories or in hotels and dhabas).

In the last few days, as worksites shut down in the light of the lockdown, migrant workers have been removed from their jobs, have not received long overdue wages and have no means to earn in the cities where they are trapped. Many have been asked to vacate their rented accommodation as they cannot afford to pay rent, and those living in their worksites have been asked to leave. In open spaces they have faced evictions and harassment. Without cash to purchase rations, no arrangements for shelter, and no transportation to return to their villages, scores of workers have been marooned in cities facing hunger, uncertainty and great health risks.

Many more, across the country, have set out for their villages on foot, covering long distances with their small children, and with no food, water or support. At the borders, they face long queues and police checkpoints, which further exposes them to health risks, and defeats the purpose of the lockdown.

Even where they return to their villages, they are facing extreme cash shortages as the main source of livelihood for their households is shutdown - they are unable to purchase basic necessities. They are also not able to access adequate healthcare back in their villages. On the contrary, they are facing stigmatization as local communities and health systems fear that they have brought the infection with them. This has created a sense of panic and hostility towards migrants in their own villages.

The horrifying situation facing this large group of workers - who already face multiple vulnerabilities, including malnutrition, tuberculosis and other illness - must be mitigated immediately. This requires urgent, concerted efforts of various institutions across different states and the central government.

We put forth the following demands to secure safe and dignified lives for migrant communities in the

wake of the pandemic:

Measures to be taken in urban and industrial areas where migrants work:

- **On an urgent basis, free and subsidised rations need to be made available to migrants without the need for identity or domicile documents.** While the central government and states have announced relief measures, the most notable of these being free or subsidised rations, they are restricted to those holding ration cards with domicile status in the city. While cash transfers are being made to poor households, these are based on existing lists of beneficiaries of different schemes. Migrant workers do not have access to ration cards in the cities where they work, nor do they make it to official lists - as an uncounted and invisible population they fall completely outside the purview of the state. All such eligibility barriers should be removed so that critical assistance can be provided to migrants in this time of crisis.

- **Police cooperation at migrant work destinations is of utmost importance.** The state should reach out to high migrant pockets through civil society organisations in the cities to do a regular status check of food availability or other shortages and take measures for providing the same through the police.

- **Shelters should be opened up for migrants at all costs.** Many workers live in open spaces and are being assaulted by police authorities for being outside at the time of a lockdown, while others are being removed from their existing living arrangements by landlords and employers. Hence providing them with dignified shelter, where they also have access to cooked food and health checkups, is imperative.

- **Health systems at the level of the Urban Health Centres (UHCs) must be strengthened** so that preliminary screening and counseling can be accessed easily by poor, vulnerable communities such as labour migrants. These should be complemented with intensification of health clinics in clusters where migrants are still stranded.

- **Banks and ATMs must be kept open and functional throughout the lockdown.** They are the only source of cash for migrants, who do not have UPI/PayTM/GPay. This will allow them to access cash transfers through the government or private organisations and use it to purchase necessities.

- **Restaurants, small dhabas and eateries must be allowed to remain open throughout the lockdown.** Small, cheap eateries located in industrial clusters are often the only source of food for migrants who live within their work units. They do not have cooking facilities or utensils in their living spaces, relying on these eateries for food.

Measures to be taken in rural, migrant-sending areas:

- **Health systems should be strengthened at the village/tehsil levels (PHCs and CHCs)** so that rural communities, including migrants who are back from cities, do not have to travel long distances to access healthcare in this dire situation. Laboratories and testing facilities should be expanded to the district and block level so that migrants who have returned from other states and other rural communities can access them easily.

- **Health systems must work at the panchayat level, along with rural local bodies and community groups** to ensure healthcare access to returnee migrants. They must refrain from using tactics of intimidation and public shaming of migrants in order to bring them under quarantine. Currently, lists of migrants and those being tested are being circulated publicly and notices are being posted outside their homes, posing a threat to migrant households by local communities who

are panicked. This must be stopped immediately, and anonymity must be ensured. Health systems must act to spread correct information and awareness among local populations so that they do not stigmatise returnee migrants or create situations of under-reporting.

- **While Direct Benefit Transfer of MGNREGA wages** has been announced, many rural households have not even received older MGNREGA payments that have been stuck for months. These must be transferred immediately.

- **Accurate information about accessing subsidised rations must be communicated to rural communities who do not know how to access it.** Rural communities remain confused about where and how to procure rations, with many households facing shortages.

- **The police must refrain from lathi charge and harassment of those who step out of their homes,** given the large shortages of rations and other supplies among rural households. These households are also not able to stockpile rations as in the case of urban middle class populations and will have to buy in smaller quantities more frequently. The police must cooperate in spreading information about how to access supplies and offer support for safely acquiring them. Currently, ration and grocery shops are not allowed to open even for a few hours in rural areas.

Measures to be taken by the central government:

- **The central government should set up mechanisms for inter-state coordination between source and destination states in prominent migration corridors across the country so that migrant workers can be brought back home to safety and/or provided for adequately in cities, in terms of shelter, food and other relief measures.** Just as extensive arrangements were made to bring back Indian citizens stranded in other countries, labour migrants stranded in other states/cities must also be allowed to get to their villages during this period of great uncertainty and calamity. Some states such as Rajasthan have initiated a limited number of buses once workers reach the Rajasthan border by foot, but connectivity must be expanded at least for a few days until inter-state workers are able to get to the relative safety of their villages. The central government should mandate destination states to arrange transportation till the border, and source states to ensure that migrants are picked up from the border and transported to their villages. Adequate health protocols such as screening, quarantine and testing (as in the case of international travellers) could be instituted for internal migrants as well. The fiscal resources for responding to migrants in destination states must be shared by the central government to supplement state efforts.

- **A legal cell must be set up both at the central and state levels to effectively protect the wages of workers.** Large evidence of non-payment of wages, forced leave and retrenchment have been surfacing since the lockdown. This will result in significant wage losses for workers who are already on the margins of society. Many migrants in industrial areas have been living inside their factories while work is shut down as they have nowhere else to go. They have been subsisting on advances from their contractors who might deduct these sums from their wages once the lockdown is lifted, creating bondage-like situations. In order to mitigate this, the central government must direct employers and contractors that advances given in this period cannot be deducted from the wages, and keep the legal cell open for a period after the lockdown to respond to wage and advance related cases.

- **It is necessary to ensure universal PDS, ensuring subsidised rations to all households, including migrants who are not in the lists of destination states.** The central government has taken the step of subsidised rations for 80 crore citizens. This measure will leave out migrants as they remain outside PDS lists in their destinations.

- Cash shortages among migrant workers and their families should be tackled at the level of the source states, through MGNREGA payments and disbursements by rural local bodies. The labour ministry has announced direct benefit transfer to construction workers using Building and Other Construction Workers (BoCW) cess funds. The state governments have been “requested” to use these funds to provide for construction workers. However, migrants often fail to get themselves registered as construction workers with the welfare board due to bureaucratic delays and complications and may not have access to bank accounts. To overcome this, cash disbursements at the level of the rural local bodies must be made available.

- Many migrants are also share-croppers, agricultural labourers or small farmers with landholdings that they cultivate seasonally. For their benefit, the government must consider these demands of farmers’ groups:

- Provide free safety equipment to sharecroppers, agricultural labour and farmers to ensure harvesting of essential and perishable food items.
- Invoke the unemployment benefit clause under the MGNREGS to pay allowances to agricultural workers who lose work due to the lockdown; and
- Make an assessment of the crop loss due to the lockdown to ensure compensation, including the wages of agricultural labour and sharecroppers; issuing direction to banks and the Reserve Bank of India to revise crop loan guidelines irrespective of pending instalments to start the fresh cropping season; and declaring a one-year moratorium on the recovery of crop loans and all loans under different schemes.

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The Covid-19 pandemic has generated interlocking crises at multiple levels. ESSF is providing thematic and geographic coverage in English and French.

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We have also selected a few articles with a global [political](#) analysis, as well as a few articles tracking the emergence of global progressive [movements](#) related to the pandemic.

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