



**Shramik Express?
'Harassed' migrants suspicious of govt
orders, action, promise**

Calling for coordinated and urgent actions for migrants in distress, a group of senior academics and social activists in a statement, following a well-represented discussion on May 26 to understand the reasons behind their plight, have said that “no government authority, at the centre or in states, has any comprehensive understanding of scale and type of migrant workers, especially those who are in vulnerable, insecure and informal employment and occupations.”

Stating that Shramik Special trains, already highly insufficient in numbers, are proving “chaotic and hazardous”, the statement says that “different, contradictory and confusing rules and orders by different state governments continue to cause further obstacles to migrants returning home”, adding, the result is, “Thousands are still walking on foot, avoiding main highways so that they are not arrested and harassed by the police.”

TEXT

Coordinated and urgent actions are needed by central and state governments to enable safe and caring transportation of millions of migrant workers and their families still stranded away from home. During the past week, several Shramik Special trains have been started from major metro centres to ferry these stranded workers to their home states and districts. But, each train carries less than 1,500 passengers, and 3-4,000 trains may be needed to complete the journey for all these migrants wanting to return home. The process of getting inside a train has become chaotic and hazardous. Reports from Ahmedabad, Surat, Pune and Mumbai continue to suggest that hordes of migrants are huddled together in parks and public grounds, confused and anxious, awaiting information about their tickets, date and time of journey and the station from which to board.

State governments and railways have issued names and mobile numbers of designated officers to be approached by migrants to get themselves registered by showing their identity card. Most migrants do not know about these mobile numbers. Most of them are not aware of these.

Central and state governments perhaps think that occasional advertisements in newspapers and digital announcements on internet, WhatsApp and Twitter are regularly accessed by these stranded migrants. A large number of these migrants have run out of charge on their mobile, and also unable to put fresh money to access data, SMS or call. A basic principle of effective communication is that it is not complete unless the recipient understands clearly sender’s message!

Different, contradictory and confusing rules and orders by different state governments continue to cause further obstacles to migrants returning home. On the Madhya Pradesh-Maharashtra border, thousands of migrants are stranded for days; now the police is asking them to show a medical certificate which says they do not have infections.

The Odisha government has begun to transport migrants from Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka and Telengana, heading towards their homes in Chhattisgarh, Bihar or West Bengal, across the state by official bus service, providing them food and water enroute. But, the Uttar Pradesh government has taken migrants arriving in the state to district headquarters or nearby big cities, from which they can go home.

Nearly 40 academics, researchers and social activists convened a discussion to understand the reasons behind continued distress being faced by migrant workers around the country. It became clear in this deliberation that no government authority, at the centre or in states, has any comprehensive understanding of scale and type of migrant workers, especially those who are in vulnerable, insecure and informal employment and occupations.

Estimates based on latest rounds of National Sample Survey (NSS) and extrapolation from 2011 census data suggest that nearly 50-60 million (5-6 crore) migrant workers are forced to run away from various economic centres in the face of the lockdown as their livelihood has stopped suddenly without any income to stay (and pay rent) or to feed themselves and their families.

*Quarantine facilities for migrants are over-crowded,
without adequate water and toilet facilities.
Women and children face special distress and risk of violence*

The pattern of migration over the past decade has shown most workers are migrating from economically poorer districts of the eastern and northern India to livelihood opportunities in western and southern regions of the country. The continued higher fertility rates in the states of north and east have been supplying youthful workers, largely in informal, insecure and low-paid jobs and occupations, to western and southern states of the country.

It is precisely the absence of any coordinated and evidence-based response by government agencies that thousands are still walking on foot, avoiding main highways so that they are not arrested and harassed by the police. The troubles and harassment

faced by them over the past 5-6 weeks has made them suspicious of any government orders, actions or promise of support. Finally, the Supreme Court has taken cognisance of such stories to ask the central government to produce their plans to deal with the continued distress of millions of migrant workers in the country.

Reports and preliminary studies on the arrival of migrant workers in their home villages and states are further distressing. On arrival compulsory quarantine has become farcical in some states, as governments have now told them to self-isolate in their own homes. Quarantine facilities are over-crowded, without adequate water and toilet facilities. Women and children of migrant families returning to such quarantine face special distress and risk of violence.

A survey of 2,204 migrant workers returning to 143 Gram Panchayats in 4 districts of Chhattisgarh carried out by Samarthan shows that another 2000 or so are on the road towards home in this area. They are returning to homes with no water or toilet facilities (nearly one-third); 70% own less than 2 acres of land, which is not capable of providing food security to their families.

Most of them have experience and skills in construction related jobs, and only 15% know any agriculture skills. So, how are they going to feed themselves, since they have no money left after returning home? MGNREGA is only a temporary option for some, as nearly a third do not have job cards.

They are depressed, angry, anxious and exhausted; they need urgent support for the short-term over next 3-4 months; policies and programmes are needed for their livelihoods, skilling and emotional well-being in the coming period. There is an urgent need for coordinated policy actions both to facilitate their journey home as well as rehabilitation on their return home.

Signatories

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- Sheela Patel, Director, SPARC, Mumbai, Chairperson, Slum Dwellers International
- Prof Amitabh Kundu, Former professor, JNU, Chair NARSS, Swatch Bharat Mission (Rural)
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- Binoy Acharya, Director, Unnati, Ahmedabad
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केवल सीमित वितरण के लिए

इस बुलेटिन के लेखों में व्यक्त विचार
लेखकों के अपने हैं।

आप लोक शिक्षण व प्रशिक्षण के लिए विचार में
प्रकाशित सामग्री का सहर्ष उपयोग कर सकते हैं।
कृपया सौजन्य का उल्लेख करना न भूलें और साथ
ही अपने उपयोग से हमें अवगत करवायें ताकि हम
भी उससे कुछ सीख सकें।