

# Why do migrants get such a raw deal?



## **It isn't clear if the Centre or States are responsible for their welfare. Setting up a migrant welfare ministry would be in order**

The coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent lockdown has left tens of millions of migrant workers in India stranded in their host States with little social safety net. A survey of over 11,000 migrant workers by Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) found that three weeks into the lockdown (mid-April) 70 per cent of workers had less than ₹200 left with them, and 98 per cent of them had not received any cash from the government, 89 per cent of them had not received any pay from their employers.

Even when the Central government allowed stranded workers to return to their home States in late April, several administrative deadlocks and confusions emerged. For example, the Bihar government failed to provide permission to run trains from Kerala to bring migrants back home.

The Karnataka government went a step further in showing its apathy towards migrant workers — after talking to a lobby of prominent builders in the State they decided to cancel the migrant trains and take away the right of migrants to return home. In Karnataka, until mid-April, 93 per cent of the stranded workers had not received any ration supplies from the government as per the SWAN survey.

Yet, the government now assures to provide workers with “essential facilities” but still not the fundamental right to free movement and voluntary work. Does the government realise that in coordination with the builder lobby, it is turning migrant workers into bonded labour?

## **Lack of intent?**

Why has the Indian state — which includes central, provincial, and local administrations — been so inept at helping the stranded migrants? The Indian administration is not new to executing initiatives at a mass scale, like organising the elections or the Kumbh. Critics say that the problem is lack of intent — poor migrant workers are invisible to the governments. They point at the class bias that exists in the administrative response. Stranded students, tourists and pilgrims that occupied a higher class than workers, were afforded a dramatically prompt, efficient and dignified treatment, while migrant workers were provided no such support.

However, there exists a more fundamental issue that the faltering government response exposes — who is responsible for the welfare of the migrant workers in India — the host State, the home State, or the Central government, or all of them?

The answer remains unclear as migrants are the only group of people that have been included in India's Concurrent List. As long as accountability and power remain ambiguously distributed it will lead to confusion. Without clear accountability, advance planning and contingency arrangements for their welfare won't be made.

## **Help the poor first**

The crisis requires national leadership, as it is a national issue. The best way to urgently help the migrant workers is to help the poor — whether stranded migrants or not. The poor should be immediately offered unconditional cash transfers by the Central government.

The Central and State governments in India, till date, have only released paltry sums to support the poor in the lockdown, and the support extended to migrant workers is even less.

We expect the size of effective but small cash transfers (half of a migrant worker's median monthly wage of around ₹10,000) and other benefits to the poor to run into lakhs of crores. The Central government should immediately do such spending.

If we do not allay the concerns of the stranded migrants today and let them slide into further poverty, they may hesitate to return to the cities when normalcy returns causing long term negative effects on the urban economy and economic growth. The Karnataka Chief Minister is already worrying out loud along these lines, and the best response for him will not be to force migrant workers to stay put, but to focus on their economic concerns and stability so that workers will voluntarily wish to work in his State.

We cannot let the foundations of economic growth go barren, which they will if we ignore the migrant workers, and the poor in general, who make a large demand and labour base for the economy.

The pandemic also offers an opportunity to build new systems of governance that will significantly improve its effectiveness. At the Central level, a Ministry of Migrant Welfare can

be set up that will have the necessary funds and coordinating power to help domestic immigrants. Just as the Ministry of External Affairs is the single point of contact for Indian migrants living abroad, a ministry of migrant welfare would be the single contact point for domestic immigrants.

The Central ministry will need a decentralised machinery at the city level to provide support to migrants. Many volunteers and civic groups are actively helping migrant workers today during lockdown. Such a decentralised machinery could comprise bureaucrats from the host States as well as volunteers and civic organisations from migrant and local communities. This proposed ministry's role would be to conduct large migrant surveys, taking stock of their welfare systems, employment terms and collect aggregate statistics on inter-State migration.

## **Emphatic leadership needed**

Announcing the national lockdown in India was a bold decision. It showcased a good model of Centre-State cooperation. Such cooperation required leadership. The economic and governance solutions to help India's migrant workers — who form the foundation of our economy — require decisive, detailed and bold leadership as well, where the Central government needs to step up and take the lead, and State governments must actively participate.

What the government and the broader ruling class must also understand is that migrant workers are not just bodies, they are human beings too, with full economic, social, and political rights and dignity as enshrined to all of us. So when the question arises — to whom does the migrant belong? The answer is, they belong to nobody but to themselves, just like all of us.

Nobody owns them, or can take them for granted, and their plight is all our collective responsibility. If we forfeit this responsibility, their plight will become our destiny too.

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