

# ALLAYING THE FEARS OF MIGRANTS IN TAMIL NADU

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Revenue officials and police personnel meet migrant workers to dispel misinformation at the Red Hills near Chennai on March 6, 2023. | Photo Credit: B. Jothi Ramalingam

In June 2018, a Tamil Nadu State Transport Corporation conductor in Erode installed the destination board, Perundurai Market, in English and Hindi on his Route 17 bus. The origin and destination points were prominently displayed in Tamil too. He wanted to help Hindi-speaking labourers in the semi-rural town to board the right bus. But images of the Hindi board were circulated on social media, inviting protests. [The conductor was suspended](#) for using an “unauthorised destination board.”

Cut to March 2023, different arms of the Tamil Nadu government, particularly the police, the Labour Department and district administrations, are busy issuing public appeals in Hindi [addressing the same migrant population](#).

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This ‘transformation’ in less than five years in the Dravidian heartland does not reflect dilution of the State’s official two language policy — Tamil and English; it was borne out of the necessity to prevent the State’s economy from being crippled by politically orchestrated rumours of violent attacks on Hindi-speakers, specifically Biharis.

Over the past 15 years, migrants, mostly from Bihar, Jharkhand, Uttar Pradesh, Odisha, West Bengal and the Northeast, have taken up labour-intensive jobs in industrial estates, the construction and infrastructure sector, garment factories, export units, restaurants, fuel stations, salons, and large retail showrooms in Tamil Nadu. There are over six lakh such migrant labourers in the State who work for lower wages in a distant land due to impoverished conditions back home, and the industry in Tamil Nadu is equally dependent on them. Therefore, the M.K. Stalin administration was quick to realise that any exodus of labourers triggered by panic calls from relatives, who saw videos of violence being peddled as evidence of targeted attacks on Hindi-speakers, could bring development work to a halt. It could also disrupt the conducive industrial climate and impact Mr. Stalin’s ambition of steering the State to a \$1 trillion economy.

Some politicians are opposed to the extensive appointments of ‘non-natives,’ many of whom are unable to converse in Tamil or English, in Central government organisations, railways and banks in Tamil Nadu. Despite such political undercurrents and apprehensions about how the continued

flow of migrants could alter the demographic composition, Tamil Nadu remains hospitable. In fact, last month, when a video of a Tamil man attacking migrant train passengers surfaced, it drew widespread condemnation from the people of the State. The man was arrested and the incident forgotten.

However, things took a curious turn after a Hindi journalist tweeted two videos of murders, claiming that Tamils were targeting Hindi-speakers. DGP C. Sylendra Babu pointed out that the murders in Coimbatore and Tiruppur — industrial cities with a large migrant population — were not ethnic hate crimes. In one case, the victim and the accused were Tamils; in the other, both were north Indians.

Yet, some BJP leaders from Bihar claimed that the people of their State were being selectively targeted. What cannot be overlooked is that this charge came soon after Bihar Deputy Chief Minister Tejashwi Yadav shared a platform with Mr. Stalin where the latter [gave a clarion call for a Congress-inclusive united opposition](#) to take on the BJP in next year's Lok Sabha polls.

The politicising of an imagined targeted attack on Biharis begs some answers. Just as a north Indian often fails to differentiate between a Tamil and a Malayali, it is equally challenging for Tamils to distinguish between Biharis and people from U.P. How then could they have selectively attacked Biharis? Why were such political concerns not raised in BJP-ruled U.P.?

The political construct branding Tamil Nadu as being hostile to native Hindi speakers drew sharp criticism from Mr. Stalin, who acknowledged that migrant labourers are integral to the State's development. "Those who spread rumours that migrant workers are being attacked in Tamil Nadu are against the Indian nation; they cause harm to the integrity of the country," he declared. This [was reassuring to the migrants](#). It is hoped that the issue will die down as the State balances its image of *Vandhorai Valavaikkum Tamizhagam* (Tamil Nadu provides livelihood for guests) while remaining steadfast in its opposition to the "imposition" of Hindi or uniformity.

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