

NO RELIEF FOR THE NOWHERE PEOPLE

Relevant for: Indian Economy | Topic: Issues Related to Poverty, Inclusion, Employment & Sustainable Development

“The lockdown imposed by the government has exposed the deep fault lines in India’s labour market.” Migrant workers wait to board a special train to return to Agra from Ahmedabad. AP

Jamalo Makdam, 12, died on April 18 walking back from the chilli fields of Telangana to her home in Chhattisgarh. She and a group of other workers decided to return home on foot, as many migrant workers did, after losing their jobs, incomes and even accommodation following the announcement of a nationwide lockdown. Her journey ended in death, possibly due to electrolyte imbalance and exhaustion, said health officials.

In the past month, migrant workers have died, been lathi-charged, herded into shelters with minimum facilities, [sprayed with dangerous chemicals](#), and denied entry into their home villages by the dominant elite. These reports and images have seared our conscience.

Full coverage | [Lockdown displaces lakhs of migrants](#)

The labourers — men, women and children — are the classic nowhere citizens of India. They have no rights and entitlements in the areas in which they work and to whose prosperity they contribute. Being from the poorest and the socially discriminated groups, they are also denied entitlements in the villages to which they belong. Not surprisingly, they have been invisible in policy discourse. There are no firm estimates of their numbers. Estimates prepared by this author and updated from time to time suggest that short-term and circular migrants in the informal wage economy could number 60-65 million. About 40% of these migrants work in the construction sector and 15% in agriculture. The rest are engaged in manufacturing, transport, and other services. With accompanying family members, their numbers would not be less than 100 million. About half these labourers are inter-State workers. We exclude in this estimate longer-term circular migrants who also work in the informal wage economy and as self-employed workers in the urban economy.

Data from the National Sample Survey and the India Human Development Survey (IHDS) show that these migrant labourers are mainly from rural areas in poor regions and States, and belong to the poorest socio-economic classes. Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes are over-represented among them. They form the largest section of child, bonded and trafficked labour. They predominate in activities that are characterised by three Ds — dirty, dangerous, and difficult — and consistently face a fourth D — discrimination. Nearly 70% of migrants work in urban and peri-urban areas in and around growth centres in States in the north, west, and south of the country. Industry and employers are bemoaning, for the first time, the fact that activities in a number of crucial sectors and industries will not see revival without these workers.

The lockdown imposed by the government has exposed the deep fault lines in India’s labour market which operates in a sea of growing informal employment relations. We know that nearly 81% of wage workers even in non-agricultural sectors do not have any contract with their employers and enjoy no security of tenure. Many do not even know their final employer. The IHDS tells us that half the migrant labourers are hired through contractors. Their condition shows the dismal state of implementation of labour regulations, particularly with respect to inter-State migrants.

Also read | [Migrant workers, other stranded people to pay 50 more to get home | Railway Ministry will donate 151 crore to PM-CARES fund](#)

With the government's sudden lockdown decision, wages for jobs already carried out remained unpaid. A large percentage of migrants remained saddled with debt taken as advances from their employers, contractors, or landlords. The government's announcement of a tepid relief package on March 26 did not address any of the concerns of this section as the frail social security net largely does not cover them. Crucially, the government side-stepped its major responsibility of paying compensatory wages to the informal workers for the lockdown, putting this onus on employers who are already hit hard by the lockdown.

As the migrant workers tried to move to their homes, the government responded with a strict State and inter-district lockdown and ordered placing migrant workers in quarantines-cum-shelters, and the detention of workers who remained on the move. In a status report submitted to the Supreme Court on March 31, the government argued that the movement of these workers to rural areas constituted a serious risk of spread of COVID-19, a fact that has remained unsubstantiated.

By the end of the first week of April, the government submitted that about 6.3 lakh workers were in shelters run by governments in different parts of the country, while another 4.5 lakh were in shelters run by NGOs and others. Nearly 10 million workers were receiving food assistance through governmental and non-governmental sources. About 5 lakh to 6 lakh workers had reached their source States. As a matter of fact, reports from the ground suggest that a large proportion of intra-State migrants had trudged back home so the total returnees was probably closer to 25 million. At present, with about a million migrant workers in shelters or quarantines, at least 20 million such workers are still stranded at worksites or living in hovels. Most of these, as successive surveys attest, have not been able to avail of any food or cash assistance, and are on the brink of starvation.

Coronavirus lockdown | [Despair packs migrant workers from U.P. into a concrete mixer truck](#)

On April 19, the Indian government issued a standard operating protocol on movement of stranded labour, permitting the movement and employment of stranded migrant workers in worksites only within the States in which they were involuntarily detained in shelters. On April 29, the Central government issued another notification finally permitting stranded labourers and populations to travel inter-State to their homes only by buses. On May 1, the Railways were permitted to run special trains for migrants with coordination and costs being borne by the States and, in some cases, fares being paid by the hapless migrants. The receiving States, it must be pointed out, are precisely those which have the weakest fiscal capacity. The ensuing confusion and delay has also increased the plight of the migrants. It goes without saying that it must be the responsibility of the Centre to coordinate the movement of the stranded populations by trains, air and buses, and to provide adequate resources, not only for transportation, but also for wages and food requirements of all such workers whose loss of jobs and incomes followed the national lockdown.

Comment | [It's about food, nutrition and livelihood security](#)

The fight against the pandemic can only be built on a vision of a society that is inclusive, equitable, and non-discriminatory. India needs a unified labour market and universal social security system which can ensure security, safety, and dignity to all workers. Pandemics do not recognise artificial walls between living spaces and work spaces, and both have to be able to provide basic amenities and access to health security to all. However, it seems that current

policy responses to the crisis and towards the migrants are still embedded in a short-sighted framework that recognises and reinforces the idea of two Indias.

Ravi Srivastava, former Professor of Economics at JNU, is now honorary Director of the Centre for Employment Studies, Institute for Human Development, Delhi

Why you should pay for quality journalism - [Click to know more](#)

Please enter a valid email address.

To reassure Indian Muslims, the PM needs to state that the govt. will not conduct an exercise like NRC

To continue enjoying The Hindu, You can turn off your ad blocker or Subscribe to The Hindu.

[Sign up for a 30 day free trial.](#)

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com