

Ground Report

Covid-19 Lockdown Leaves Delhi Migrant Workers With Neither Jobs Nor Social Security; Experts Blame Political Apathy, Lack of Legal Protection

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Asheef Iqubbal



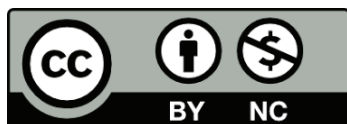


COVID-19 LOCKDOWN LEAVES DELHI MIGRANT WORKERS WITH NEITHER JOBS NOR SOCIAL SECURITY; EXPERTS BLAME POLITICAL APATHY, LACK OF LEGAL PROTECTION

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JNU Professor Avinash Kumar remarked that migrant workers' relations with the government are 'not based on mutual respect.'

Lalan Yadav, a labourer living in Delhi's Wazirpur slum, is more worried about his livelihood than COVID-19.

Yadav is a migrant worker who hails from Bihar's Arrah. He came to Delhi 22 years ago in search of a better livelihood, and now has three children. He lamented, "I have not got any work since 25 March, when the lockdown was announced. In my locality - Machli Bazaar - there are at least 200 labourers who don't have anything to eat. People here are forced to beg. No government or political leader is listening to us."

Yadav further said, "If the government can help me to get my money from the work that I have done in March, it would be enough. When the lockdown was announced, our employers told us that we'd be paid and asked us not to go anywhere. We did get some of that money. However, Rs. 2500 is still due from the work done in March. Now, when I call up my employer, he doesn't respond."

The 46-year-old added, "Since March, I have not been able to send money to my family. My wife applied for a ration card several times over, but without luck. Everyone is corrupt there, from the officer to the *mukhiya* (village head). I don't even have enough money to go home."

The nationwide lockdown due to coronavirus has made the lives of economically vulnerable people such as Yadav much more difficult.

According to an assessment by the Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy, more than 120 million people lost their jobs in April due to the lockdown, 75 percent of whom were working in the unorganised sector.

There has been an exodus of migrant workers from cities due to employment drying up. Some of them travelled for long distances on foot or on bicycles.

COVID-19 as a Threat Multiplier

Yadav used to earn Rs 11,000 per month working as an operator in a steel factory, at times managing to top up his earnings by working overtime. His monthly wages were below the minimum wage set by the Government of Delhi, which is Rs 14,842 for unskilled workers, Rs 16,341 for semi-skilled workers, and Rs 17,991 for skilled workers for eight hours of work. He does not even know the name of the factory he worked in, because, in Wazirpur, most factories do not have the names of the establishment displayed on their premises. He only knows the plot number of the factory where he worked.

Authorities distribute cooked food at a nearby school, but Yadav said it is irregular and inadequate. He said, “I don’t know what I should fight against - hunger or the virus. It does not feel good to stand in long queues and risk one’s life to just take a meal.”

Yadav is not alone in his predicament. According to data collected from 11,000 workers across the country by the Stranded Workers Action Network and Azim Premji University, by the third week of the lockdown, 50 percent of the workers had less than one day’s ration. More worryingly, 96 percent said they have not received foodgrains from the government, while 70 percent said they have not got any cooked food¹.

Yadav’s neighbour Phool Kumari Devi, a 39-year-old daily wage labourer, has a similar story to tell. Her husband also works in a steel factory in Wazirpur and has not received his salary since March. Despite the Delhi High Court’s order to the state government to provide foodgrains to needy persons irrespective of availability of ration cards, she has not received foodgrains. (In Delhi, online registration of Aadhaar is mandatory to get foodgrains).



¹Acharya, D. (12 May 2020). COVID-19 Lockdown: 50% of stranded migrant labourers have less than Rs 100; 97% didn’t get cash transfer from govt, finds report. Firstpost. Retrieved from <https://www.firstpost.com/india/covid-19-lockdown-50-of-stranded-migrant-labourers-have-less-than-rs-100-97-didnt-get-cash-transfer-from-govt-finds-report-8359701.html> [26 February 2021]



Phool Kumari said, "I have not received any help from any government. I have even registered my Aadhaar card online to get the foodgrains. But 20 days have passed, and I still haven't got them."

She added, "I have to pay rent, but I don't have money."

Amrita Sharma, who leads the Centre for Migration and Labour Solutions at Aajeevika Bureau, an organisation which works with migrant labourers, said, "There are two aspects to this issue. Firstly, to what extent does the government intend to help migrant labourers? Secondly, what are the mechanisms available? As it is, migrant labourers don't get the benefits of social welfare schemes for food security, housing, toilets, etc as they don't live in their home state."

Sharma remarked, "The government neither has any data on migrant labourers, nor any structure to reach out to them. Even the National Sample Survey Office fails to capture the migrant workers." Comparing the country's situation with that of China, she added, "The situation with regards to migration in India is quite similar to that in China. But China has at least developed a structure to reach out to migrant workers, whereas we don't have anything like that."

According to the National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector, only about 8 percent of workers in the informal sector are covered under any social security scheme. Out of the total workforce of 47.41 crore, 82.7 percent is in the unorganised sector.

Speaking about the exclusion of migrant workers from welfare measures, Sharma said, "Most of the social welfare schemes are linked to domicile certificates (a document of permanent residence). Migrant labourers do not have such residential documents...they often don't have employer IDs either, as they work in the unorganised sector. Many of them work in small factories, and are employed on a contract basis. Further, some states have been weakening existing labour laws. Workers don't even get dignified wages."

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, at least ten states, including highly industrialised Gujarat and Haryana, have suspended several labour laws to attract investors in the states. These changes will allow employers to downsize their workforce at will, and require workers to work for more than eight hours per day.

Deepening Exclusion and Exploitation

Rakesh, 38 years old, is a daily wage worker who lives in Delhi's Indira Vikas Colony, not far from the prime minister's residence. He is the sole breadwinner in his five-member family and works as a construction labourer. Before the lockdown, on regular



days, he used to earn Rs 8,000-9000 per month. He said, "I used to send back Rs 5,000 home and live on the rest. Now, I don't have any work. I have borrowed money to buy ration."

Rakesh further said, "I don't know how long I will survive like this. At home, my family will starve too. I had even registered online to return home, but it didn't work out."

He added, "Some people have got a cash assistance of Rs 5,000. But I haven't, although I am a construction worker."

Avinash Kumar, professor at the Center for Informal Sector and Labor Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, said, "Increasing contractualisation has strained access to social security provided under the BOCW Welfare Cess Act, 1996. In most of the companies, there are no records of these workers. They work on a contractual basis. They do not even get anything in the name of security. These workers have been exploited for years, even before the COVID-19 crisis hit them. COVID-19 has only exposed the broken system".

Nikhil De, associated with the Mazdoor Kisan Shakti Sangathan, said, "Despite having foodgrains in the buffer stock, the government has not been able to provide foodgrains to many needy people. Even cash assistance is very insufficient. The government has only given Rs 500 to women who have Jan Dhan accounts. Many families don't have any Jan Dhan account, and many accounts have been closed."

Simmering Social Unrest

De said, "The government had ordered that companies should pay the workers during the lockdown (the government has now revoked the order). But it is common knowledge as to how many companies have paid this amount. The government has locked such labourers up without even ensuring two square meals for them. Now, when they want to go home just to survive, the government is not facilitating that either."

He added, "This government sent flights for people stranded abroad and got buses to ply for students. However, migrant labourers were exploited. These workers are witnessing injustice in broad daylight. They are dying on the streets."

Amrita Sharma from the Aajeevika Bureau, speaking about why the rights of migrant workers are often ignored, said, "Migrant labourers often do not vote in the states where they go in search of work. Perhaps this could be a reason why state governments do not pay attention to them. Migrant labourers do have some political agency, but unlike the middle class, livelihood is probably a more important issue for them."

She added, "The reason behind this mass exodus is that these migrant workers don't



trust the government. If the government doesn't act compassionately, the current situation can take any direction. We have already witnessed small-scale violence in Surat and some other parts of the country."

JNU's Avinash Kumar said, "If every decision in a democracy is taken based on who votes and who doesn't, then it cannot be called a democracy. If the right to basic equality and dignity is not given to every individual, then democracy is only a machine to win and lose elections."

He added, "The labourers' relations with the government are not based on mutual respect. They face police brutality in their day-to-day lives. Sometimes, police officers demolish their huts, or sometimes, police personnel throw away their stalls. For such labourers, it is hard to believe the government and stay in cities, where the social bonding is not as strong as in villages."

Kumar concludes, "Governments, especially the Central government, need to step up and support the people. And this support has to be universal."





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