

# Migrant labourers: People? Or just Countable living beings ?

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Migrant labourers constitute a significant portion of the workforce in India. They resemble the qualities of salt in our country. Their presence, their work was never really as visible as their exodus.

The Covid-19 Pandemic has brought open the great misery of these people, who constitute a large chunk of the people working in the unorganised sector (the unorganised sector employs around 92% of our country's workforce). The sudden announcement of a nation-wide lockdown with a view to hinder the exponential outgrowth of the corona virus has left many of these working humans away from their so-called homes and families, without any means to earn a living and also the least amount of food that one can imagine having in a day. Their financial situation seems to be like that of a broken funnel: savings falling from the broken base, with no addition to it in the form of any income.

They are distressed. They are dejected. They desperately want to go back to where they belong. Despite some help from the Central Government, there looks no real betterment in their condition. With the insistence being on staying where one is, majority of transport has come to a halt. Only the SHRAMIK trains are being run by the Central Government & State Governments to help these people in migrating to their places of origin. The recent package announced by the Central Government promised free foodgrains for the next two months to migrant workers who do not have ration cards. However, economists opine that this intervention was a bit too less and a bit too late, and that the free foodgrain provision should have been universalised to deal with widespread distress. It doesn't seem to give a lot of relief to people under consideration. As a result of this, the country has been witnessing mass protests by migrant labourers, which obviously do not take care of the norm of the hour i.e. social distancing.



To avoid this turmoil, many workers have set out to reach their homes by road, by walking on rail tracks etc. At least thousands of them, if not millions, have been found walking for 4-5 continuous days with no proper rest and food. Many are accompanied by their families that include many pregnant women also. Their journey is certainly not the destination. It is just a self-rescue mission analogous to the historic ones in 1947 and 1971.

Many, during these journeys, have lost their lives. To name a few incidents, 16 of 20 migrant workers were killed in their sleep on the railway track near Aurangabad on when they were run over by a goods train at Satana village. 8 Uttar Pradesh-bound migrant workers were killed and nearly 55 injured when the truck they were travelling in collided with a bus. Nine were electrocuted when a tractor-trolley carrying 23 people hit an electric pole and the live wire fell near these workers. This was in Amaravati. It seems as if their lives represent the dry leaves of a tree in autumn that are falling every now and then, being crushed inhumanely!

If we continue to count the fatalities, it is enough to bring tears to everyone's eyes. With 50 days of the lockdown (likely to be extended further), there seems no horizon to the issues of this section of our workforce. With around 260 million Indians to be pushed into poverty (an OXFORD UNIVERSITY report) because of this pandemic, the migrant labourers will constitute a large chunk of these 260 million people.

Are we so impotent that we can do nothing but witness the misery of our fellow beings?

