



To Leave or Not to Leave?

Lockdown, Migrant Workers, and Their Journeys Home

A Report by the Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN)

June 5, 2020

The **Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN)** has been actively involved in relief work from March 27th in the form of zonal helplines by connecting workers to organisations and the government for rations. SWAN has interacted with about 34,000 workers across the country. Since many workers have been in dire need of cash for basic essentials, SWAN has solicited financial support from individuals who have directly transferred money to the workers' accounts. To date, SWAN has transferred more than Rs 50 lakhs directly to the workers' accounts. Since the first lockdown, SWAN released one report on April 14th and another on May 1st.

Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) would like to thank our donors for their support that enabled cash transfers to the workers in need. We acknowledge individuals and civil society organisations who responded to our requests to provide rations and other essentials to the stranded workers. We also wish to acknowledge officials who responded to requests for help with promptness. We thank the workers for sharing the stories and pictures of their journey with us.

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Introduction

The fourth phase of lockdown was completed on May 31st. The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issued [an order dated May 30th](#), with guidelines for 'phased reopening (Unlock 1.0)'. The same was reiterated by the Prime Minister (PM) Narendra Modi in the popular 'Mann ki Baat' address to the nation. Each stage of lockdown has been characterised by different types of distress faced by the migrant workers. In the first two stages of the lockdown the main concern and need of stranded migrants were food and some money in hand to buy basic essentials. While migrants were struggling to meet food and cash needs, their woes were compounded by the chaos created by the Central government vis-a-vis travel for the migrants. The spate of deaths of migrant workers in road accidents, exhaustion due to walking long distances, dehydration, hunger, and police brutality continue unabated. In light of this, it is worth recalling the steps taken by the Central government and the judicial response to the crisis.

The first financial package, Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY), announced by the Finance Minister (FM), Nirmala Sitharaman, had nothing to offer for the migrant workers. Moreover, the PMGKY also makes some incorrect claims. As numerous economists and even as per the International Monetary Fund's estimate¹, India's actual spending

announced so far by the Centre and states combined is Rs 1.42 lakh crores contrary to the Centre's claims of Rs 1.7 lakh crores. A petition for wage payments to migrant workers during the first phase of lockdown filed in the Supreme Court (SC)² was disposed off on April 21st, on grounds that the bench was satisfied with the governments' efforts to provide relief. As outlined in the first two SWAN reports, access to government relief was a far cry for migrants. More than 82 percent of those who reached out to SWAN had not received any government rations and about 70 percent had not received any cooked food. About two-thirds of those who reached out till the second phase of lockdown had less than Rs 100 left.

As the second phase of lockdown was drawing to a close, on April 29th, the MHA issued [its first travel order](#) permitting movement of inter-state migrants. An [MHA order dated May 1st](#) permitted the travel of inter-state migrants by special trains to be operated by the Ministry of Railways (MoR). Since April 29th, the MHA has issued at least eight different travel orders. In the section on travel that follows, we outline the maze of obfuscating orders that have created more chaos, destruction, and deaths. Since the Central government permitted inter-state travel for migrants, the abysmal travel arrangements meant that many migrants decided to escape the distress on cycles or

in cramped lorries. Many decided to walk thousands of kilometres making the metaphor of 'footloose workers' become an uncomfortable reality. On May 9th, [sixteen migrants were crushed to death by a train](#) in Aurangabad district, Maharashtra, as they collapsed and fell asleep with exhaustion on the railway tracks on their way home.

Forty-five days into the manufactured crisis, the FM announced a relief package titled 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (Self-Reliant India) on May 14th. A part of the scheme focussed on improving the conditions of the 'poor, including migrants and farmers.' Two immediate things from the FM's Atmanirbhar package are noteworthy to mention here. First, it finally acknowledged that 'migrants in various states require food grain assistance'. This automatically refutes the hasty pronouncement by the Solicitor General, Tushar Mehta who representing the Union Government in the apex court in the first week of April, had vociferously claimed that the PMGKY relief package 'takes care of the daily needs of every poor person including migrants.'

Second, in a self-congratulatory manner, in the first week of April the Government of India (GoI) had submitted in the SC that they were feeding 15 lakh migrants in relief shelters across the country. However, in the new package they announced that the Central government will

ensure that 8 crore migrants will be given 5 kgs of grain per person and 1 kg of chana per family for 2 months for migrants who are 'neither NFSA (National Food Security Act) or state card beneficiaries'. This begs an important question. When the Central government was now aware of the rough estimates of the number of inter-state migrants, how were they satisfied with the submission in April that 15 lakh migrants were being fed in shelters? What about the rest that are not in shelters but are still stranded without food, cash and work? More importantly, how did the judiciary approve this abysmal undercounting as acceptable on the part of the government? The FM's announcements therefore refute the Solicitor General's remarks and expose the government's flip-flop on the situation of stranded migrant workers.

According to the Atmanirbhar package announced in mid-May, the Central government further announced that it will foot the bill of Rs 3,500 crores for rations. While this is a welcome move, it comes a little too late when migrants have already started commuting. The details of identification and distribution have been rightfully left to the states. However, most migrants are not in government shelters but stay in small rented spaces close to their work sites. They are rarely registered with the state governments. The Ministry of Labour does not have records of stranded migrants despite the Chief

Labour Commissioner asking its regional head to furnish this in the first week of April³. State governments are struggling to complete surveys of households and identifying migrants and 2 weeks since the announcement we have no comprehensive picture on how many stranded migrants have been identified and how many have received the promised grain. An illustrative example of implementation hurdles is that of Haryana, which has a large inflow of migrant workers. Despite an order announcing the distribution of distress rations to non-ration card holders on April 14th, the state government is still entangled in completing household surveys, verifying lists and printing coupons. The actual distribution of ration to curb distress remains a distant reality⁴.

The Atmanirbhar package also promises 'Hygienically prepared three meals a day provided for the residents of Shelters for Urban Homeless (SUH) during the lockdown w.e.f March 28, 2020'. However, a majority of stranded migrants are not in shelter homes and there has been no attempt made by government agencies to relocate the stranded migrants to government shelters in a dignified manner.

On May 16th, the Union Minister of Railways, Piyush Goyal, in his keynote address at Bennett University said 'We have gone through the entire three months without a single person starving. That's not just the effort of the Centre or state governments. It is the

effort of 130 crore Indians'⁵. This came 2 days after the FM's announcement that finally acknowledged the plight of migrant workers. Notwithstanding the glaring insensitivity of the comment, it is also not borne out by what various surveys and testimonies indicate. For instance, a survey of more than 5,000 households across ten states conducted by Azim Premji University (APU)⁶ presents a grim picture. As per the APU survey, 77 percent of all the households have been consuming less food than before and 47 percent of the households do not have money to even buy a week's worth of essentials. Roughly one in four vulnerable households did not receive any rations. Only 31 percent out of 347 households surveyed by Dvara Research⁷, indicated that ration shops were open as usual. In a survey of 5,046 households across 15 states, conducted by Indus Action, around one in six households indicated that they were in need of food. Every survey, including the insights from SWAN's own relief work paint the same picture of dire hunger, starvation and lack of money to buy basic essentials. And yet, the ruling dispensation continues to turn a blind eye to the stark realities.

‘We have gone through the entire three months without a single person starving. That’s not just the effort of the Centre or state governments. It is the effort of 130 crore Indians’.

Piyush Goyal, Union Minister of Railways

The Courts and Migrants

The impact on livelihoods have been equally devastating. In particular, the destructive impact on livelihoods of women has been more. As per the APU survey, among the urban workers surveyed, 82 percent of female casual workers and 80 percent of male casual workers have lost employment. 89 percent of self-employed female workers and 77 percent of self-employed male workers have lost employment. What is worse is that the lockdown has also resulted in job losses for the regular salaried workers. More than three out of four female and male urban salaried workers have lost jobs. To add to these woes, a whopping 89 percent of urban households reported that they cannot pay the next month's rent and about 41 percent of urban households reported that they had to take loans to meet expenses. For rural households, these numbers are around 65 percent and 33 percent respectively. Most of these loans are likely from private money lenders who charge exorbitant interest rates. All these point to how a large part of the migrant workforce has been pushed to the edge of existence. After facing such an onslaught of indignity and hostility, it is natural that the migrant workers would want to head back home. The Central government has demonstrated appalling apathy in ensuring safe and dignified travel for migrants.

While the role of several High Courts (HCs) in dealing with the migrant worker crisis has been commendable, the SC has, however, acted with alarming apathy. This has resulted in a growing loss of faith in the apex court. In dismissing a Public Interest Litigation (PIL) on April 9th, concerning wage compensation for migrant workers, the Chief Justice of India (CJI) had remarked 'if they are being provided food then why do they need money for meals. How can we stop it?' said the SC bench headed by Justice L Nageswara Rao while dismissing a plea by lawyer Alakh Alok Srivastava on May 15th referring to incidents where migrants were killed while walking home. The plea sought a directive from the Centre to all district magistrates to identify and provide food and shelter to stranded workers. The Solicitor General Tushar Mehta [said](#), 'states are providing interstate transport. But if people get angry and start on foot instead of waiting for the transport to be provided nothing can be done. We can only request that people should not walk. Using force to stop them would be counterproductive'. In response to the question on the death of 16 migrants being run over by a train in Aurangabad district, the bench said 'How can anybody stop this when they sleep on railway tracks?'

On the other hand, 12 HCs have responded with empathy⁸. Most recently, referring to the travel situation

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as 'nothing but a human tragedy', the Madras HC remarked 'even after the sorrow and sufferings were reported in the media, nothing happened for the past one month as there was no coordinated effort between States'. The Madras HC directed the Central and the state government to submit an 'Action Taken Report' based on 12 critical questions by May 22nd. Taking note of the 'lapses' on part of the Central and state government in dealing with migrant workers, on May 28th the Allahabad HC asked the state government to 'give a complete layout to reduce migration of the natives of Uttar Pradesh to other parts of the country to earn minimum livelihood'⁹. The Karnataka HCs intervention on May 21st in directing the state government to bear the costs of migrant workers' travels has also been notable¹⁰ and says 'the concept of a Welfare State has been consistently a part of our Constitutional philosophy. Today, because of the reluctance of the state government to bear the train fare of the migrant workers who are not in a position to pay, apart from the allegation that it will violate the fundamental rights of the migrant workers, they will be forced to continue to stay in the state. They will have to look upon the state government for providing food and other necessities'.

The visuals of a small child trying to wake up his dead mother in a railway station, injured migrants being shoved in the same lorry with dead people,

a dead man found in the bathroom of a train, among several others have redrawn the development map of India. The Central government has at best created an archive of distress and a museum of misery. The eerie silence of the otherwise vocal Home Minister, the platitudes of the Prime Minister and the apathy of the SC only reaffirm that the dignity of migrant workers is neither a concern for the legislature nor of the apex court.

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On May 25th, in an attempt to restore faith in the judiciary, 20 senior SC advocates wrote a scathing letter¹¹ to the CJI and other senior judges of the SC seeking cognizance of the SC in the biggest humanitarian crisis in independent India. Urging the SC to act, the letter stated that 'institutional deference to statements made on behalf of the government and the court's apparent indifference to this enormous humanitarian crisis, would if not rectified immediately,

amount to the court having abdicated its constitutional role and duty to these teeming millions of poor, hungry migrants'. It took a bouquet of grim statistics, large scale deaths, deplorable images on the television, among others for the SC to finally wake up. The SC took suo moto cognizance of the situation on May 28th. Despite the massive delay in responding proactively to the crisis, we welcome the interim orders of the SC which are broadly aligned with SWAN's recommendations on travel in its two reports and in pleas made to various government agencies through letters.

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Damned If You Go Damned, If You Stay

Between May 9th and May 27th, there have been 80 deaths on board the Shramik Special trains as per official data from the Railway Police Force (RPF)¹². Acknowledging the deplorable state of affairs in these trains, a zonal officer of the railways has said that 'Heat, exhaustion and thirst are among the primary issues faced by the passengers on board these trains'. On the contrary, the railway ministry said in a statement that 'It has been observed that some people who are availing this service have pre-existing medical conditions which aggravates the risk they face during the Covid-19 pandemic. A few unfortunate cases of deaths related to pre-existing medical conditions while travelling have happened'.

Keeping in mind that workers have faced severe hostility and indignity for the last 2 months, it is imperative that the MoR adopts a humane approach to the repatriation of migrants. To this end, any travel order should ensure that workers are able to exercise their right to return with ease. Barring one letter dated May 18th sent by Ajay Bhalla, Secretary, MHA, to all the Chief Secretaries, every order has been lacking in imagination and empathy. In fact, even the letter sent to all Chief Secretaries is not easily available in the public domain. The orders appear to be an afterthought in trying to contain this manufactured crisis instead of resolving it.

Since April 29th, there have been [seven different travel orders for migrant workers](#). On May 11th, the MHA issued an [8 point Standard Operating Procedure \(SOP\)](#) for interstate travel of migrant workers. In response, SWAN had sent a letter to the MHA highlighting the gaps in the SOP and presented a detailed SOP for travel of migrant workers. In turn, the MHA released an order on May 16th giving the details of a National Migrant Information System (NMIS) by the National Disaster Management Authority. However, the portal itself has been a mystery given that a link to it was available only on May 20th. Some inquiries to the ministry had revealed that in fact this portal is not meant for the public at the moment but is only meant for administrators with login access. It is unclear why a press statement was released by the MHA if the portal is not public. The portal appeared to be a platform only to collect migrant workers' information without detailing how that information would be used.

There were at least a few major concerns with this portal. First, many workers had registered in police stations and in different state governments' websites. There is no clarity on what will happen to those. Second, it does not give any acknowledgement once a worker registers on it. Third, it is unclear how trains are going to be scheduled based on the information collected here. Fourth, the May 16th order

states that mobile numbers will be used for 'contact tracing and monitoring movement during covid 19'. However there was no indication that these mobile numbers will also be used to send important information to migrants on their travel application status, train booking, date and point of boarding etc. While there are some merits of scheduling travel through a single portal, a solely technological solution to what is a massive logistical, institutional and a humanitarian crisis, is highly insufficient. As the large crowds that gathered in Ghaziabad on May 18th¹³ to register for travel made clear, the repatriation of migrant workers will need much more than a technological fix.

In the MHA order dated May 19th, the MHA has instructed the MoR to issue train schedules and protocols for movement of passengers. However, plans, schedules or timelines are not specified. None of the MHA orders even make an attempt to create multiple worker-facing offline access points for workers to register to travel, which can then be bulk uploaded on this platform. In the letters sent to the MHA, SWAN has outlined that the minimal major requirements at this point are the following: First, increase the number of government run shelters. Special Economic Zones, malls, marriage halls, army areas, public and private colleges, public and private schools etc in each ward need to be converted to sanitised temporary government shelters.

Each such shelter should have multiple worker facilitation centres. Each such facilitation centre should have separate dedicated registration counters for high density destination states such as Bihar, Jharkhand and Odisha. This is to smoothen the travel registration process. Second, whether online or offline registration, workers should receive an acknowledgement that the registration has been done and should be provided a time-bound tentative date of journey to reduce anxiety. Third, there is an urgent need to increase transparency and awareness about the train/bus schedules. Finally, there is a dire need to increase the number of trains and buses that workers can travel for free.

Migrant Workers Still Stranded: No Food, No Cash And No Work

From May 15th to June 1st, based on 821 distress calls received that corresponds to 5,911 migrant workers from across the country, we find that 80 percent still do not have access to government rations. There has been some improvement since May 22nd but the massive exclusion 2 weeks after the announcement indicates that food distress amongst stranded migrants remains almost as high as the first phase of the lockdown.

- About 76 percent of people who have called us since May 15th have less than Rs 300 left with them and 72 percent of people

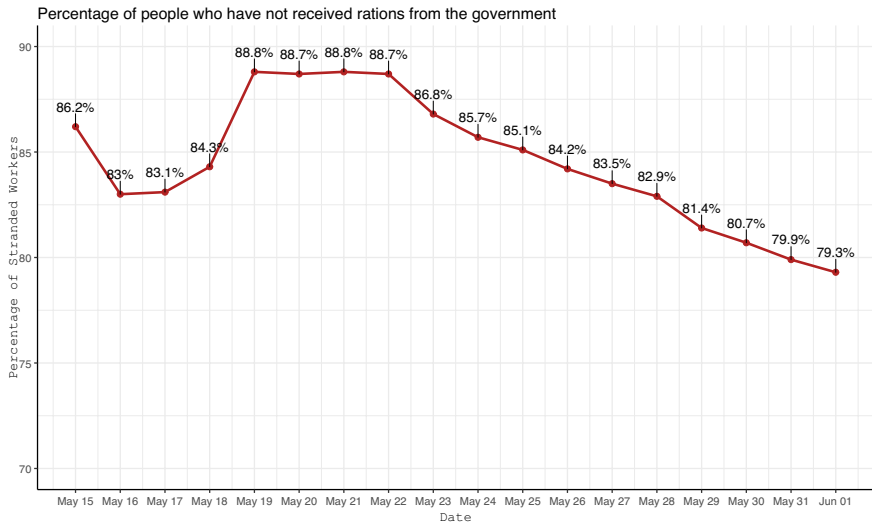


Figure 1: Percentage of People Who have Not Received Government Rations

have less than Rs 200 left with them. 63 percent of people have less than Rs 100 left with them.

- About 57 percent of the people sent in 'SOS' calls (representing 820 people) with no money or rations left or had skipped the previous meal. This is a sharp increase of 7 percentage points from the second phase of lockdown.

The following results are based on Interactive Voice Response (IVR) calls (done in collaboration with <https://gramvaani.org/>), where we called back some of the migrant workers who had reached out to us during the lockdown period and who have been provided some assistance through SWAN. Here we assume that

the respondent's response is valid only for that person and does not reflect the thought of the group. Calls were made to 1,963 workers. However not all questions were answered by those who answered the call. We have indicated the total number of those who have responded to each question in parenthesis for easy reference.

- 67 percent (of 1,963) migrants are still stuck in the same place since the lockdown was announced, only 33 percent have left.
- Figure 2 indicates the number of workers who are stranded and those that have returned to their home states. Jharkhand has the highest proportion of migrant workers who have reached home

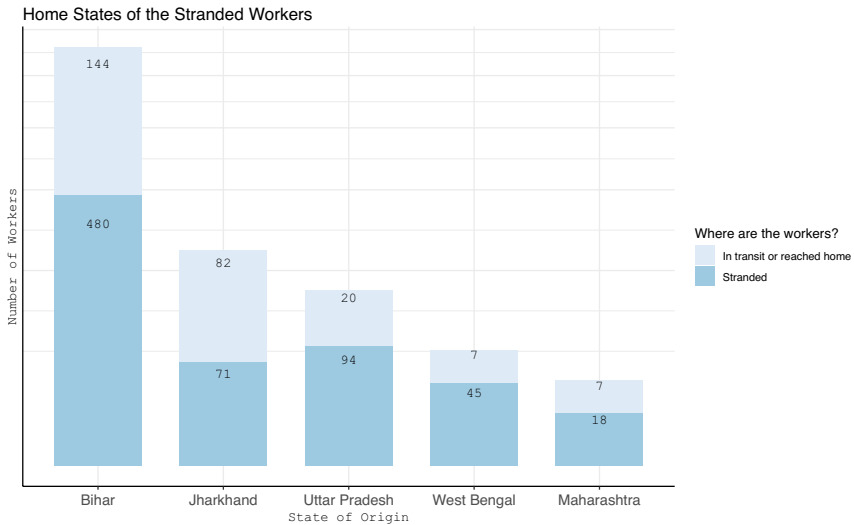


Figure 2: Stranded in Host States and Returned to Home States or are en route.

Lack Of Cash, Food And Income Security Pushes Migrant Workers To Want To Leave Immediately

- Of those who are stuck, 55 percent (out of 1,166) want to go home immediately. This figure is higher than when we asked the same set of workers this question at the end of April. At that point 33 percent wanted to leave immediately after the second phase of lockdown ended. This flies in the face of government claims that most migrants have returned home and that Shramik trains are no longer needed.
- The desire to return home immediately is not being driven by

‘sentiment’ alone as the narrative that has been whipped up by some media houses and officials suggests. 75 percent (of 1,124) who are still stuck in places they have migrated to for work, do not have any employment.

- It is perhaps some kind of silver lining to note that 75 percent of migrant workers (of 1,582) are not being threatened with eviction by their landlords. But this may very well be the case because they are leaving anyway and landlords do not want to lose potential rent.
- Of those (585) who had left the cities and their places of work, 88 percent had reached home and 12 percent were still in transit.

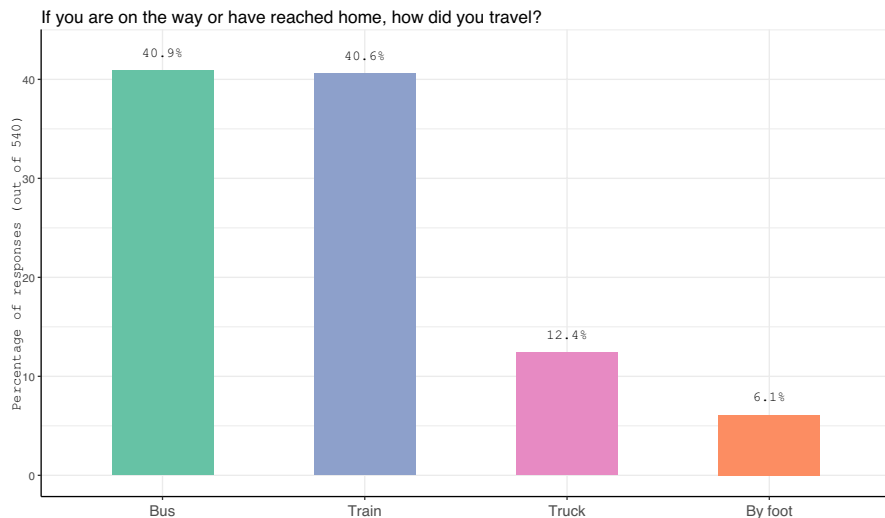


Figure 3: Modes of Transportation to Return Home

- 44 percent of those who have left took buses and 39 percent managed to get on a Shramik special. 11 percent took trucks, lorries and other such modes of transport while 6 percent made the perilous journey on foot. (See Figure 3)

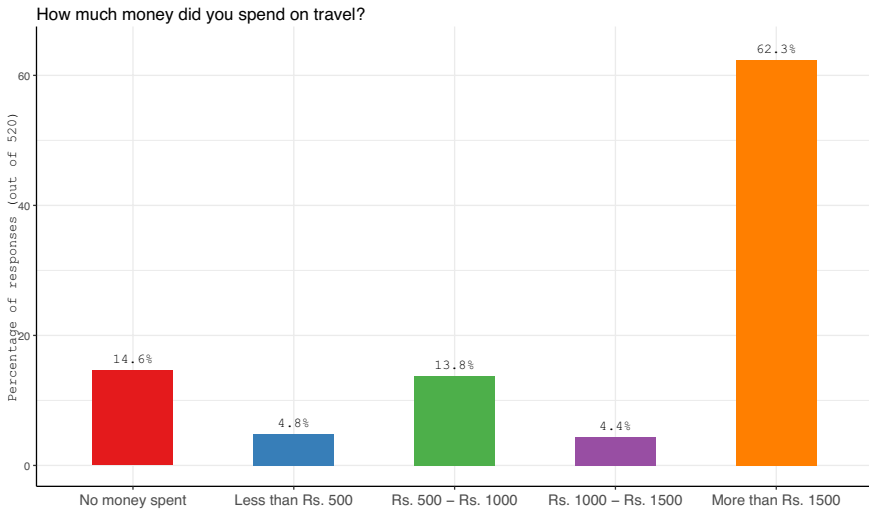


Figure 4: Money Spent on Travel

There Is No Such Thing As A Free Ticket

- The SC issued an interim order on May 28th that migrants will not have to pay for travel. This came too late. More than 85 percent of the migrant workers who have returned home or are in transit have had to incur costs for this journey.
- As the SWAN report published on May 1st highlighted, 64 percent of the workers who reached out to us were down to their last hundred rupees. Moreover, since only 19 people (out of 1,963) who answered our IVR survey have been paid during the lockdown, it is safe to

presume that the results from the survey represent workers who have not been paid during the lockdown. It is clear then, that any journey home, a month later, with no new source of income would have to be made on borrowed money.

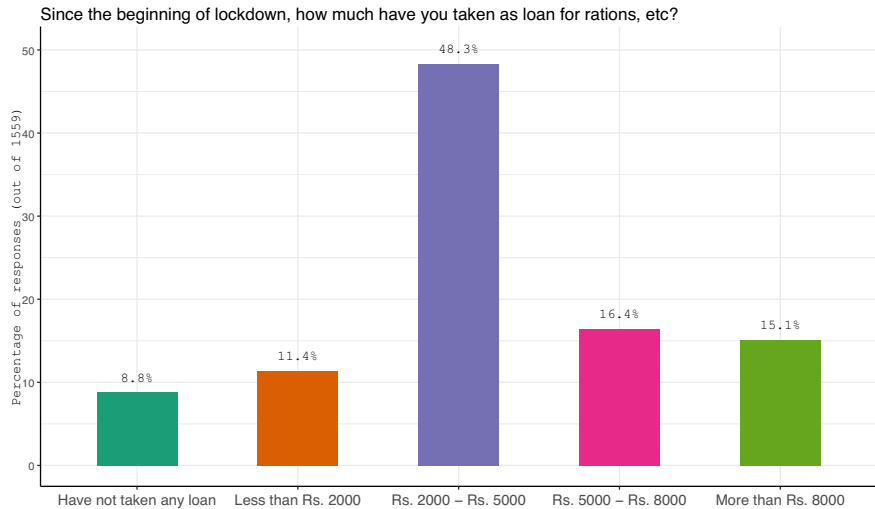


Figure 5: Loans Taken

- It is not surprising therefore, that 48 percent (of 1,559 people) have taken loans between Rs 2,000 and Rs 5,000 during this period. 30 percent have taken loans of more than Rs 5,000 (See Figure 5)



Overcrowded trains with two to a berth

Following the Worker's Journey Home

The remarkable resistance and resilience demonstrated by the migrants during this lockdown period has forced the government and the judiciary to respond. This section captures the experiences of migrants as they navigate the lockdown and make the long journey home. Their stories are as winding and complex as the paths they have had to take. Each story has its own set of contingencies, risks and outcomes. We have tried to preserve the conversational flow between the worker and the SWAN volunteer.

These cases are organised under the following themes:

- Bribes paid for travel
 - Unhelpful police
 - Walking home: In despair and tired of waiting for options to travel
 - Road travel: Risks in hitchhiking and high costs of private transport
 - A tedious and costly journey ending with issues of quarantine
-
- Eviction by landlords, and employers coupled with travel uncertainty
 - Paying to fill travel forms
 - No prior information about trains
 - Issues with regard to travel registration and shelters for migrants
 - Poor facilities on trains especially access to food and water
 - No trains from smaller towns and between certain locations
 - Dynamic pricing of IRCTC tickets coupled with non-availability of Shramik trains

A horrific case of two Adivasi women from Jharkhand trafficked from Dumka district of Jharkhand to Bengaluru via Delhi came to our attention recently. The two women arrived in Bengaluru in October 2019 to work in an incense factory called Bharat Chemical Products where they were illegally confined. They were promised monthly wages of Rs 9,000 but had received only Rs 200 per week. They were made to work 15 hours a day, were beaten up repeatedly and one of the women was raped inside the factory premises twice.

They escaped the factory in March 2020. Due to a series of positive coincidences, exemplary courage demonstrated by the two women, and a construction labourer from Jharkhand called Nicholas Murmu, they managed to reach out to civil society groups. Subsequently, two FIRs have been filed against the perpetrators of rape and violence and the two women with their children are now safe. A complaint against the factory owner has been registered.

We welcome the promptness with which the Karnataka administration and Jharkhand police have responded. The concerned police acted with urgency and the Social Welfare Department issued a compensation cheque to the rape survivor quickly. The Revenue Department has issued

compensation under the Bonded Labour Act with urgency. The Labour Department has ensured that the factory owner has paid the pending dues with interest and penalties. However, the administrative processes to register police complaints by the already traumatised and the vulnerable are complicated. With the legally mandated district Local Complaints Committees (LCC) being almost non-existent, it is difficult for women to access the judiciary. Therefore the process of redressal is near impossible without civil society intervention.

These women's ordeal is one of many experiences of forced suffering and humiliation that the unorganised workers have undergone over decades. The lockdown has exposed the frailties of those who have been forced to occupy the cracks and crevices of our society for too long. The PM's calibrated silence on the issue of women migrants is deeply disconcerting. This also shows that lack of the government mandating private companies to maintain clear and transparent records of workers in their firm opens more avenues for multiple forms of exploitation, counterproductive.

Eviction by Landlords, and Employers Coupled With Travel Uncertainty

Raimal, part of a group of 40 workers from Chinnapandu, Chittoor, Andhra Pradesh reached out to SWAN on May 18th. They all worked for Apollo tyres, but had received proper food and shelter from the company only for a month. The local tehsildar was also aware of their situation, but both the contractor and the tehsildar kept giving promises about providing rations but never delivering the same. It was through a local group that rations were finally arranged for them. On May 21st they started walking to Jharkhand and walked to the Chittoor railway station 100 kms away. After SWAN contacted the district administration, the administration facilitated their train journey to Jharkhand on May 22nd.

Sanoj was one among 15 migrant workers hoping to return to their home state, Jharkhand. They had been evicted by their landlord on May 10th. Left with no option they were living on a pavement outside a hospital in Bengaluru, close to the police station where travel registrations were done, waiting for their turn to register. The group lived on the pavement for a week, with difficulty in accessing food and receiving no help from the police in finding shelter either. Through sheer luck—information that seats were available on a train were shared by a local contact of SWAN—Sanoj and a few in his group were able to get tickets to travel to Jharkhand the next

day, which was May 18th. The police station where they had to report though was nearly 20 kms away. It was already night and it was also raining. With no public transportation available, the group had to take a taxi for Rs 1,500. At the police station, Sanoj and others were apprehensive. They were unable to figure out the procedures for medical check-up as language was a huge barrier. The fact that they had to deal with the police was even more intimidating. They finally boarded the bus where their train ticket was handed to them. While the cost of train travel printed on the train ticket was Rs 1,020, they paid Rs 1,100.



Bablu Kuski, part of a group of 26 workers used to work in a factory in Devanahalli, in the outskirts of Bengaluru and reached out to SWAN in the first week of May. The members of this group were from different states—Odisha, West Bengal and Jharkhand. Desperate to leave for their homes, they had submitted their

resignation to the company and their manager. When they called SWAN, one of the main concerns was the fear of eviction, as they had been asked to vacate their rooms which had been arranged by the company. But when the lockdown was relaxed in mid-May the manager asked them to resume work and said their pending wages too would be paid. But the group still wanted to go home. Those from Odisha and Jharkhand together hired a bus and left Bengaluru on May 21st paying Rs 6,000 per head. The money was sent to them by their family members back home. The workers from West Bengal were still stranded as there were no trains plying to the state, and there was the additional issue of travel disruption owing to the Cyclone Amphan.

On May 27th, SWAN contacted the Deputy Commissioner of Police who said that tokens to travel to West Bengal would be given at a particular police station. In Bengaluru, a system for zone-wise distribution of tokens for train travel in police stations had been initiated, adding to the already chaotic situation around travel. The information on which zones, and which specific police station in a zone was issuing tokens on a particular day was very difficult to come by, causing confusion and panic as workers tried to cut across the city with little time and almost no money in hand. The workers faced a lot of difficulty in getting from Devanahalli to the police station on Magadi Road—a distance

of 60 kms and were anxious till the last moment that they would not reach in time to get a token. They reached the police station, but the processing centre was a little distance away and uphill, forcing those who had come to register to scramble up the slope carrying their heavy luggage. After registering they had to wait in an open ground from 8 am to 3 pm. There was no shade, no food or water in the processing centres. The only relief was that after their ordeal they were able to catch the train home to West Bengal.

Kamal and seven others were stranded in Gubbi, Tumkur, Karnataka, and were trying to go to West Bengal, but there were no trains at that time for West Bengal. They had also registered on the Seva Sindhu portal (web portal for travel registration) of the Karnataka government. They had reached out to SWAN on May 7th. At that time, their employer was asking them to return to work, but there were unpaid wages amounting to Rs 96,000 and no promise of being paid for the work they would do. When Kamal's group refused to work, the employer threatened to evict them from where they were staying. SWAN, along with local labour rights activists, convinced them to stay where they were till they received a message for a train to West Bengal. After a few failed attempts and persistent calls by our volunteers to the police administration of Tumkur, Kamal and the group got

their chance to leave by Shramik train on May 30th from Bengaluru.

Gurunanak Ravidas and his group of 20 workers were working at Godrej Air and residing in a place provided by the company in Hoodi, Bengaluru in Karnataka. They had been restless to return to Godda in Jharkhand as it was also the harvest season there. After being in touch with the SWAN volunteer since mid-May, when a train to Jharkhand was scheduled for May 31st they were informed of the same. The information however could be relayed to them only the previous night as no prior information about trains was available. And they had to report to Bengaluru International Exhibition Centre (BIEC) on Tumkur Road 40 kms away the next morning to register for the journey home. Furthermore, the contractor was trying to prevent them from leaving, and the employer had also not paid their wages for the last 15 days' work. Some in the group were reluctant to leave as they were worried that they did not have the resources to travel. For others, their families did send them money, but this was far from enough. The employer had also said that if they left the premises they could not come back, and the uncertainty of whether they would reach the registration site in time, owing to distance and limited money to spend on travel added to their anxiety. The uncertainty forced 11 of the workers to change their mind who decided they would not take such a risk that would leave them stranded

without shelter in the city. SWAN arranged a bus through a local NGO to take them from Hoodi to BIEC, and once the bus reached to pick them up, all others decided to leave. They were able to reach BIEC, register and board the train the same day. They reached Ramgarh in Jharkhand on June 2nd. The Jharkhand state government has arranged buses to take them home to their districts.

Abhishek Kumar Tewari used to earn around Rs 9,500 per month working as an Operator at ASTI Electronics in Manesar, Haryana on a 'casual' basis. His son was born in December 2019, at an Employees State Insurance hospital in the National Capital Region (NCR). Around Holi in 2020, he had accompanied his wife and his son back to their village in Jharkhand, where his parents live. Soon after he returned for work in Manesar, the lockdown was announced. As he had not worked in March (having gone to Jharkhand), his salary in April was not due in full, and he was paid only around Rs 4,000. He had also registered online on the Haryana government website to travel back to Jharkhand. The company temporarily reopened on May 18th and Abhishek resumed work. Around 10.30 pm on May 25th, when he was working the night shift, he received a message asking him to reach Tau Devi Lal Stadium by 7 am next morning. However, his night shift would end only at 7 am. As a result he could not reach the stadium on time, and missed the train. The

company closed again around May 28th, informing everyone that nobody should come until further notice. The information trickling out now is that the workers who were working on a 'casual' basis will 'definitely not be called back'. Abishek is left with around Rs 1,850 in his account and a few days of ration. He is thinking of borrowing money for travel, if that takes him home. He called a SWAN volunteer, and said he does not want cash or rations. He just wants to go back to his son and wife as soon as he can (even if it means he has to incur a debt).

Dhananjay Kumar had to look for alternatives to return home as his employer refused to take him back. Work had resumed for him on May 21st in the small factory where he was employed. After 3 to 4 days of work, the employer told him that Dhananjay could not be employed anymore because he was relatively new: he had come to **Haryana** only in January 2020. The employer has told him to come back after 2 to 3 months and try because now there is no business at this point, and he needs to give priority to those who had worked longer in the company.

Paying for Filling Forms

In **Mumbai, Maharashtra**, filling online forms has not been without costs for workers. One of the workers mentioned that some shops were helping workers with filling forms but charging Rs 200 per form.

A few workers from Uttar Pradesh and Punjab said that they paid someone mostly at a local mobile or ration shop somewhere between Rs 20 to Rs 30 to get their travel forms filled since they either did not have smartphones or were not confident that they would be able to fill the details correctly.

No Prior Information About Trains

On May 12th, **Dhaniram Dhruwey**, part of a group of 12 workers that included four women, was contacted based on a message sent by a member of an NGO in Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh. The group worked for a radiator company in **Bengaluru** that had not paid them for March, and they had little money left. Their house owner was not asking them for rent, but they were uncomfortable staying on. They registered on May 1st in the Hulimavu police station close to where they lived but had not received any information regarding their travel. They were having difficulties registering on the Karnataka government portal, but did manage to get this done as well. Since they had received information (falsely, and source not known) that a train was leaving to Madhya Pradesh on May 15th they left their rooms with their baggage. But on realising that there was no train, and not wanting to go back to their rented accommodation, they decided to stay with some friends in JP Nagar 4 kms away from their

original rented place. But as the group was large they were afraid that the friends' house owner and neighbours would ask them to leave. They approached the JP Nagar police station to enquire about the status of their registration. The officers there were unhelpful at first. But a SWAN volunteer insisted on speaking to the police, and they were told that if they have registered at the Hulimavu police station then the data would be recorded and conveyed to the control room. When it was their turn to go they would be sent an SMS and also receive a call from the control room. Also, both Dhaniram and the NGO contact in Bhopal were unaware that they would have to pay for the tickets.

As they were concerned about continuing to stay in their friends' house, SWAN arranged for them to be taken to a shelter, for which local transport of Rs 300 per auto was also paid for by SWAN as the workers did not have money. They had to take four autos to accommodate them and their luggage. On May 22nd evening they received a call from the police regarding a train that night at 10.30 pm and left to board it. As luck would have it, the Karnataka government had announced on the same day that the government would bear the cost of travel for migrants. So Dhaniram and his group did not have to pay anything for the tickets.

Issues with Regard to Travel Registration and Shelters for Migrants

Sonu Oraon from New Jalpaiguri in West Bengal worked in a restaurant and lived near Electronic City in **Bengaluru**, Karnataka. He knew many who, due to the lockdown, had lost their work and some of them were also evicted from their rooms as they could not pay rent. Sonu had reached out to SWAN in the last week of May. On the evening of May 31st, SWAN volunteers found out about a train leaving for West Bengal the next day. When SWAN asked if he was interested in travelling to West Bengal and also to let us know if there were others, Sonu sent across a list of 58 people. When we confirmed that the train would leave at 8 pm on Monday, the group started packing their bags to reach Jigani police station which is around 10 kms from their homes. Suddenly, SWAN volunteers received information regarding a change of venue for registering for travel—from Jigani police station to Manpho Convention Centre 47 kms away. The SWAN volunteer conveyed this last minute change of venue, but Sonu and others in the group were determined to reach Manpho Convention Centre at whatever cost to register to get home.

Through a local NGO, SWAN arranged a bus for the group to reach Manpho on Monday morning i.e June 1st. Not only this group, we had talked to eight other groups numbering altogether

more than 100 people. Some of the groups reached even earlier than the reporting time of 8 am at Manpho. However, there was a long queue of more than 300 people outside Manpho. Till lunch time there was no clear information available to those in the queue as they waited in the heat without food, water and with conflicting information such as no registration of West Bengal migrants at Manpho, change in venue, cancellation of train etc. They spent more than 4 hours in the long queues waiting for their turn. Around 3 pm in the afternoon, the workers were allowed inside Manpho Convention Centre and it was indicated to them that they will have to stay in the shelter.

The shelter was crowded, and physical distancing or maintaining hygiene was a far cry. Conversations with the workers who could not travel showed the different state of mind. A large number of them such as **Sonu, Rajupradha, Tamang, and Sulav** were matter of fact about the delay though they were determined to stay overnight. **Meghamani Giri** and her group were very uncomfortable with the hygiene of the place and were avoiding eating anything so that they would not have to use the toilet. **Munna Tamang** was also very disturbed by the hygiene and the toilets, and was concerned she would fall sick, but had resigned herself to staying one more night. One of her acquaintances also in the shelter had a small baby and they were concerned

for the health of the baby. **Charan Tigga** in a group of six said that he was feeling quite low. **Bijay Darjee** was concerned about exposure to the virus as there was no physical distancing. The food queue was long and the place was crowded. He also said that he had received a call from the Vivek Nagar police station saying that his name had been cleared for travel (he had registered earlier and had been waiting for his turn) but since he had already registered again at this centre he decided to stay here. To add to this there was still no proper communication or assurance to the people who decided to stay in Manpho with rumours of trains cancellation. Finally the next day there were buses arranged to take them to Bengaluru railway station, from where they were soon on their way home to West Bengal.

Rahul and Rina, a couple from **Peenya in Bengaluru, Karnataka** reached out to SWAN wanting to travel to their home state Odisha. When SWAN received information at the last minute of a train scheduled to leave for Odisha, the couple were informed to be ready to leave their homes the next day at 7 am. As the locations where the tokens for the journey were being issued were not disclosed in advance and at times it even changed at the last minute, we could not direct them to a specific place. Once we came to know the location, we arranged for an Ola cab to get them to the token issuing point, an hours journey away

‘This couple could not be accommodated in the trains leaving that day. As the buses left, Rahul informed us that his wife was 4 months pregnant. Nothing could be done at that point and they had to stay in the shelter overnight to catch the train on the following day. He called us later asking if they could be moved to another shelter as the bathrooms in particular were not clean and his wife was facing a lot of difficulty.’

from where they were. However, just before they arrived the counter issuing tokens for Odisha was closed and the issue of tokens for West Bengal had commenced. Thanks to the efforts of our volunteer, who spoke with one of the police personnel, they were given a token. However by this time, in the scorching sun, five bus loads of people were already on the bus, waiting to leave. This couple could not be accommodated in the trains leaving that day. As the buses left, Rahul informed us that his wife was 4 months pregnant. Nothing could be done at that point and they had to stay in the shelter overnight to catch the train on the following day. He called us later asking if they could be moved to another shelter as the bathrooms in particular were not clean and his wife was facing a lot of difficulty. Also, it was very crowded, and the queue for food was very long. We found out that if we moved them elsewhere, they would have to go through the process of standing in the queue to get a token, medical, etc. again and persuaded them to stay there. The following day they were on the train to Odisha.

Ramesh Ram who had registered online to travel from Sarai Kale Khan in **Delhi** to Vaishali in Bihar was lucky to receive a message asking him to report for medical check-up in just 6 days. However, the centre where he had to go with his luggage was around 10 kms away and he also had to reach there by 7 am. From the

medical centre he was sent by bus to Old Delhi where he boarded a Shramik train to his village.

In Ludhiana, the following process is followed: registration is followed at some point by receipt of an SMS intimating pick up points. At the pick up points workers received a medical slip, post which the workers are ferried in a bus to Guru Nanak Stadium where medical check up is done. **Maulana Helal**, one in a group of 36 who had received an SMS confirmation, collected the medical slip at the pick up point, and was then taken to the stadium. Soon they were transferred to a garden nearby where they had to wait the entire day. In the night they were shifted to nearby shelter homes along with the many others in the garden. They were taken to the garden the following day too. On the third day, after much intervention, a police officer arranged for their registration and told them they would leave on the fourth day morning. Apart from the lengthy process, they did not have to pay for anything.

In Punjab a local contact (Congress) has helped arrange travel for two large groups—on May 24th for 48 and on May 25th for 23. The list with details of workers is shared with the local contact who informs about their inclusion in the train. The workers are required to reach the Guru Nanak Stadium outside Ludhiana station 5 hours prior to departure where a medical is done and ticket provided.

They are then taken to board the trains. But there are no arrangements made for food in the stadium while the process is underway.

Jugal Ram was part of a group of seven that included five women and children. They wanted to travel from Delhi to Sitamarhi in Bihar, and had registered online on May 17th . They were lucky to receive a message for travel on May 23rd from Anand Vihar to Purnea. They were asked to report at GBSSS, B-1, Vasant Kunj, New Delhi for screening, but they were unable to go as the place was very far from where they stayed and there were children and women in the group. As a result, they had to miss the chance and wait for another alternative. They filled a form again in a nearby school and reached Bihar after a 36 hour journey on which they were not given proper food.

The **Haryana** government has been very secretive about releasing train schedules. They only started sending messages about train schedules to workers who have registered on their portal in the last week of May. In some other states, workers receiving SMSs are assigned a particular place and time to report. But the Haryana government does not disclose exact train timing, routes, halts and stations even to those migrants that receive official messages about travel. Instead, the messages are generic, stating simply that those who wish to go to Bihar need to reach Tau

Devi Lal Stadium at a particular time. Migrants have no way to find out any more details. If their home is in North Bihar, they cannot know in advance that the train will only go to South Bihar. Moreover, the messages come with very short notice, often the night before workers have to reach assembly points. Many workers are worried that if they leave to try to catch a train and are sent back, their landlords will not allow them in.

Wed, 27 May, 11:51 AM

यह मैसेज गुरुग्राम जिला प्रशासन की ओर से है। ई-दिशा वेबसाइट पर आपके पंजीकरण के आधार पर आपको बिहार जाने वाली रेलगाड़ी से जाने के लिए प्रवृत्त किया गया है। निर्धारित समय सुबह 7 बजे (27.05.20), कृपया देवीलाल स्टेडियम पहुंचने का कष्ट करें।

On June 1st, a Haryana government official stated that trains were not filling up because migrants in Haryana did not want to leave. That night, a train scheduled to leave for Bihar was filled to capacity. 900 workers were unable to get on board. They were forced to spend the night in the open in a stadium in Gurgaon. Women, elderly and small children sat the whole day inside the stadium from 7 am. In addition, nearly 500 workers from Rewari district had reached the stadium in 15 buses but were not allowed to disembark. They were kept cooped up in buses, and forced to sit in the scorching heat for hours and eventually sent to a shelter home. Those in the stadium had packed up



People sleeping under floodlights outside Tau Devi Lal Stadium

all their belongings, left their rooms behind, and had nowhere else to go. They had nothing to do but wait. In a mad scramble, 11 buses were organised by civil society (out of a total of 19 buses) and the exhausted crowd left for Bihar 36 hours later.

Prince Jha got the call. He was asked to report to the assembly point before 8 am. He set out, and reached an hour and a half early, just in time to hear from the police that there was no train today. He was thrashed. Prince headed back to his room, disheartened. He reached there at 9 am. Within half an hour, he got a call asking why he had not shown up at the stadium. Buses were leaving within the next 30 minutes. He explained the situation, said that he

had just come back from the stadium and that it would take him 2 hours to get there. He would miss the buses. Later the same day, at 1.30 pm, he got one more call asking him to report at Tau Devi Lal Stadium as the next round of buses were due to start leaving within the next 30 mins. He declined. Now Prince has borrowed some money and got a tatkal ticket to his hometown, Madhubani in Bihar.

Kunjram moved to **Gurgaon** for work along with his wife, child and grandfather. When the lockdown came, they wanted to return to Chhattisgarh. By that time, one of the women in their group was pregnant. They called up the Chhattisgarh helpline, gave all of their details, and were told that they could board a train

leaving from Delhi to Chhattisgarh. They contacted a SWAN volunteer for help working out when the train was leaving. The timetable they had been given only mentioned when the train was expected to reach Chhattisgarh; the schedule had no departure time. We calculated that the train was due to leave the following day. But, as we tried to process their e-pass, we worked out that the Chhattisgarh helpline had only registered the husband and wife. The child and grandfather were not registered. We reached out to the Chhattisgarh Nodal Officer in Delhi. That night, we heard that there was no train even from Delhi to Chhattisgarh the next day. We tried providing some monetary support to the family to support them while they waited. Meanwhile, we contacted the Gurgaon district administration. They processed the application within 2 days. Kunjram's group boarded buses to Chhattisgarh from Gurgaon, joining around 200 other passengers on a total of nine buses. Their bus was stopped at Raipur for a few hours. But, when people protested, the buses were sent on their way.

Chhaiful stranded in **Sonipat, Haryana**, was looking to return home to West Bengal. The group of 24 included 10 women and six children. They received a call on May 27th asking them to report at a school in the Biswamil area, in 30 minutes as there was a train departing for West Bengal. They had to arrange for their own

travel and had to pay Rs 2,500 for about a distance of 18 kms. When they reached the school, they were told by the officials that the schedule of the train is not known. Meals were provided at 12 pm and 5 pm. They boarded the train on May 30th and reached West Bengal on June 1st.

Karnataka Government's Decision to Cancel Trains Causes Chaos.

On April 29th, the Ministry of Home Affairs released an order allowing inter-state travel. It seemed that migrants stranded across the country could go back to their home states. However, in a letter dated May 5th, the Karnataka government cancelled all trains for migrants. The letter was sent after a meeting between the Chief Minister and the Confederation of Real Estate Developers Associations of India (CREDAI). This distressing decision was taken solely to appease the lobby of builders and contractors who claimed that the return of workers to their home states would adversely impact the construction sector. Neither migrant workers nor trade unions representing them were consulted. Since the lockdown was announced on March 24th, builders and contractors have completely abandoned workers, providing no support by way of food or rations, and withholding wages. Many workers who contacted us also said that they were facing threats of eviction. Thanks to pressure from civil society groups and workers, the



Arun Yadav on a Shramik Train from New Delhi to Katihar, Bihar

Karnataka government was quick to withdraw the order. The train services resumed. But the sudden decision to cancel the trains left the workers anxious and with even more uncertainty about how they could return home.

Poor Facilities on Trains Especially Access to Food and Water

Shreeram Paswan travelled via Shramik train from **Delhi** via Bhagalpur to Banka, along with three others. Food was provided at irregular intervals on the first day, but on other days no food was provided at all.

Amankumar was travelling from **Chennai in Tamil Nadu** to Bihar by train on May 24th. He arrived in Bihar on May 26th but he had received no food or water on the train for 2 days. He also said that there were two people per berth.

Arun Yadav travelled via Shramik train from **Delhi** to Katihar in Bihar. With long halts, diversions and unplanned detours, the entire journey took 40 hours. Food was provided at one station in Uttar Pradesh, however this barely fed half the passengers. Arun, who missed the chance to grab a food packet, did not eat anything for nearly 2 days, surviving only on water. When he reached Madhubani station he bought himself cucumber and some snacks.

No Trains from Smaller Towns and Between Certain Locations

Pradip Choudhary and his brother, both migrants from Jalpaiguri, West Bengal, were stuck in a factory due to the lockdown in **Delhi**. They also lived in the same factory as they could not afford rent. When they contacted SWAN, they only wanted support to send them back to their native place. When asked if they had registered on the portal, they said no. They told us that they went to the local police station to get registered, but no one listened to them. We tried to register them on the Delhi government's portal for stranded migrants. But the Delhi portal for interstate travel does not allow selecting districts for the state of West Bengal. When we tried to mobilise support for them, a potential contact who was working with the government to send the West Bengal natives back to home, shared their details with concerned authorities. The workers received a call at 1 pm to reach Ambedkar Stadium for screening in an hour. But when they reached there, they did not find anyone. Moreover, the number they had called was switched off. It took us around 45 mins to coordinate with the concerned authority only to learn that the screening for the train was completed. They said that they would be trying to figure out a way to send the workers back from the same train but that did not happen. The frequency of trains for some

states such as Madhya Pradesh or Chhattisgarh is relatively low. Either no information is available about the trains plying for these states, or the workers are informed at the last moment. **Suraj and his wife Madhu**, who is 4 months pregnant, were stranded in **Delhi** waiting for information on the train to Madhya Pradesh. They said that they had registered on the state portal around 15 days back. We registered them again on the portal again on May 28th. They have not received any calls for screenings yet. Since Madhu is pregnant, her doctor has strictly advised her against travelling in a bus/car/vehicle.

A worker, too panic stricken to give his name, called a SWAN volunteer from **Bellary in Karnataka** saying that he had received a call from the control room in Bengaluru. He and his group of 30 were asked to report to Bengaluru as they had a seat in a train leaving for Madhya Pradesh the next day. They had registered on the government portal on May 3rd and with the local police station on May 5th. They had received the call at 9.30 pm on May 12th regarding the train travel and they were supposed to make it to Bengaluru on May 13th by 8 am. However, the distance between Bellary and Bengaluru was 300 kms and there was no transport available. Since they had no way of getting to Bengaluru they missed their turn on the train.

Ajit Kumar and three others are stranded in **Papum Parae in Arunachal Pradesh** and want to travel back to Vishali in Bihar. Though online accessibility was hard they have registered online as well. Registration was happening at the DC's office but it was a considerable distance away. While there are Shramik trains plying from Guwahati in Assam, this was too far from Papum Parae and the commute to Guwahati was very expensive as well.

Dynamic Pricing of IRCTC Tickets Coupled with Non-Availability of Shramik Trains

Chatrapal and a group of 50 workers in **Mangaluru, Karnataka**, wishing to travel to Madhya Pradesh had reached out to SWAN. However, there were very few trains from Mangaluru, and none to Madhya Pradesh. Since workers earlier who had reached out to SWAN had walked back to Madhya Pradesh, SWAN explored the option of bringing this group to Bengaluru and booking them on the Special trains to Bhopal as no Shramik trains were plying to the state. The volunteers contacted the district administration in Mangaluru to help with bus transport from Bengaluru but the administration wanted to see the booked IRCTC tickets first. SWAN volunteers booked the tickets, but while booking it was evident that dynamic pricing was being applied. As the number of tickets booked increased, the price per ticket jumped from Rs 2,600 to

Rs 2,900 even though there were still more than 100 seats available on the date of the journey. The ticket details were shared with the Mangaluru administration and the workers were able to leave for Madhya Pradesh on June 2nd.

Sethuram from **Mumbai** purchased train tickets for his family to return to Rajasthan. The train would however only take them to Jodhpur and they had no other means of reaching their village 500 kms away and no money either.

Bribes Paid for Travel

Lal Chavan from **Laxminagar, Tiruppur** said that police were collecting Rs. 1,500 to give out tokens for Shramik trains. The police were giving out a certain number of tokens for free, and after that number, would start charging higher amounts.

Jalauddin from **Jharkhand** was stranded in **Bengaluru, Karnataka** with a group of six others. When they approached the police to get tokens to board the Shramik train, they were asked to pay Rs 500 to be let through the gate. Then, they were asked to board a government transport bus which would take them to the railway station. They had to pay a total of Rs 1,020, that included the train fare and the bus fare.

Unhelpful Police

Bunga Srinu was part of a group of eight that included three women who

wanted to travel from **Bengaluru in Karnataka** to Andhra Pradesh. He did not know anything about the online portal or about registering. They had approached the Whitefield police station to ask about travel but were shooed away before they could even talk. They say that they were not allowed to enter the station at all.

Mukesh Kumar Yadav was stranded in **Noida in Uttar Pradesh** with his wife and 7 month old baby. He wanted to get back to his native in Aurangabad, Bihar. Out of frustration and unsure of the work situation, Mukesh along with his wife and child started walking with another group of 15 towards their home. They received information that there was a train from Daunkar, a station in Uttar Pradesh to West Bengal that went via Gaya, Bihar. They had originally planned to get down at Gaya, and go to Aurangabad from there. The train was a Shramik train and they had to buy a ticket. Throughout the journey they were not given any food and water. When they tried to disembark at Gaya the police started hitting them with lathis. They were forced to board the train and proceed to Asansol, West Bengal, where they arrived on the night of May 17th. SWAN informed a volunteer from a local NGO who with the help of a railway official contacted the Station Master in Asansol and made the group de-board the train. They also made arrangements for food and water. Arrangements were made to send Mukesh and his family to Gaya

by train the next morning i.e. on May 18th. Finally at around 12 pm on May 18th he reached Aurangabad safely.

Shreeram Paswan stranded in **Sagarpur, Delhi** went to the police station to register for travel back to Kathiar in Bihar but he was sent away by the police.

Walking Home: In Despair and Tired of Waiting for Options to Travel

Raju from **Sarhaul Haryana** put his wife and children on a bus on May 16th evening. He then decided to start walking along the highway, and after walking 7 days he reached his home in Salhanpur, Madhya Pradesh. On the way he would get biscuits and water and continue walking along with 15-20 other workers some walking and some on cycles. He was able to go home, but his wife and children were quarantined in the school.

Jagdeesh in a group of 62 started walking from **Odisha** to the home state of Jharkhand. They were helped by a MLA who provided food and made arrangements for a bus to drop them at the Jharkhand border where when last contacted they were waiting for arrangements to be made by the state to take them home. They were being provided meals thrice a day.

On May 13th **Pushpendra and Rajendra** with a few others decided to walk from **Mangaluru in Karnataka** to

Madhya Pradesh. They had registered and waited for their turn but in despair decided to walk. On May 13th they called the helpline number of a police station at Kogali but were humiliated. They also did not have any money for buying food. Soon, they were picked up by the police and taken to a shelter near Pump Room. They stayed there overnight, and were provided with a meal. Then they left in the morning to walk to the bus stand and wait for the bus to take them to the station—to continue to wait for their turn to leave by train.

Sanjeev Kumar along with six others travelled from **Sonipat, Haryana**, to Muzzafarpur in Bihar. They had registered for travel on May 4th. Tired of waiting they started walking on May 14th and going via Ghaziabad, Kanpur, Lucknow and Gorakhpur reached Muzzafarpur by 3 pm on May 17th. Part of the journey was covered on foot, and part by truck for which they paid Rs 500. They ate whatever they were offered en route by NGOs who had set up points where food was being served.

Road Travel: Risks in Hitch-hiking and High Cost of Private Transport

Amaan Alam travelled from **Sonipat, Haryana** to Araria, Bihar by truck. The truck driver charged them Rs 2,500 per person. They were 20 in total, and it took them 48 hours, and multiple screenings on the way to their village.



People traveling atop buses and trucks to reach home.

A family of five, including a child with special needs paid Rs 5,000 per person to a bus driver from **Ghaziabad in Uttar Pradesh** to Godda, Jharkhand. The passengers were dropped in Narela, Delhi instead of Jharkhand as promised. The bus seemed to have been plying without permit. There, the family stayed for 5-6 days in a kaccha house of another family of workers who had gone home. For that one week, water was the main concern for them. The family was desperate and wanted to return to their home state at the earliest and declined to move to a shelter home either. Finally with the help of NGOs seats were arranged on an urgent basis for the family on a Shramik train from Delhi to Jharkhand.

Gaurelal Kumar from Hisar, Haryana

wanting to travel to Nawada, Bihar, registered on the online portal but did not receive any message. Finally along with others they started walking, but later took a truck that charged them Rs 1,800 per person. They received a call from the government after more than 15 days of their registering on the portal when they had already reached home.

Vijay Kumar Ram and his group of eight that included two children went from **Kankrola in Haryana** to Muzzafarpur in Bihar by truck paying a total of Rs 35,000.

Budhan Kumar had registered online but left Delhi on May 13th walking till Ghaziabad. From here he boarded a truck till Bhagalpur for which he paid

Rs 2,000. From Bhagalpur, he took a bus to his home district Godda in Jharkhand. He received food only once en route at Patna. At Godda, he has been quarantined without any mask or sanitizer, but proper food was being provided.

Five groups with around seven members in each group walked and took trucks from Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh to reach their homes in Chhattisgarh and Bihar. Two other families with small children, one of whom was 8 months and the other 3 years old, travelled from Kanpur to Mungeli in Chhattisgarh by trucks. They changed three trucks and were charged Rs 1,000 per head (excluding the children). A group of 18 travelled from Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh by truck to Chhattisgarh paying Rs 500 per head.

Birsingh along with 31 others was stranded in Rajnandgaon district, Chhattisgarh and wanted to go to Damoh in Madhya Pradesh. There was no facility for state supported travel, no provision for workers to register online and Shramik trains were also not running on these routes. Together the group paid Rs 35,000 and arranged for a truck. They had to sell their oxen to survive during the lockdown. Though the cost was high they had no other option as they were living under tarpaulin tents and were eager to get home. They have reached home and have been asked to home quarantine

Jainendra along with 11 others from Rewa in Madhya Pradesh wanted to travel to Raipur in Chhattisgarh. They had registered on both the Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh state portals but they received no SMS or call. Some villagers dropped them to the border on motorcycles driving 100-120 kms and from there policemen helped them to travel to Raipur in trucks. They had to sell some of their household items like gas stove to pay the villagers to drop them to the Madhya Pradesh and Chhattisgarh border. They incurred a total expenditure of Rs 12,000.

Amresh Kumar and two others from Mussoorie, Uttarakhand, needed to travel to Vaishali in Bihar. They had registered in the local police station as well as the Dehradun smart city website but had not received any SMS or call. They decided to travel by paying Rs 2,000 from Mussoorie to Dehradun, then paying Rs 195 per person from Dehradun to Delhi by train (Janshatabdi), and taking a bus arranged by SWAN to Bihar.

Suraj Dev and a group of 20 were stuck in Chityala, Telangana wanting to return to Odisha and Jharkhand. They had been evicted by their contractor as they did not want to return to work once lockdown restrictions eased. They registered in the police station but were asked to go back to their rooms. The police also went with them to ensure that the contractor did not evict them. Those who had

‘No health screening processes were done for the people who returned to Odisha. For those who travelled by truck to Jharkhand, their Aadhar card and photo was taken every time a state border was crossed. On arrival at the Jharkhand border, the from and to address were noted and temperature was checked.’

to return to Orissa hired a private bus for which no pass was required by paying more than Rs 30,000. Those wanting to return to Jharkhand paid Rs 900 per person for the truck (which had 39 people). No health screening processes were done for the people who returned to Odisha. For those who travelled by truck to Jharkhand, their Aadhar card and photo was taken every time a state border was crossed. On arrival at the Jharkhand border, the from and to address were noted and temperature was checked. At the district that they were travelling to, Gadwas district, their temperature was checked as well but they were asked to home quarantine.

Kishore Pandit left by truck from **Bhiwandi in Maharashtra** to Giridih, Jharkhand. It was a 14-wheeler and there were 35 workers on board, so he said they had enough space to lie down. He did a medical test in Bhiwandi for Rs 100. For the truck he paid Rs 2,800. The truck was not stopped anywhere on the way. On arrival there was a medical test done at a local clinic and he was sent to a quarantine centre where he had to arrange for food to be brought from his home.

Mahendra Yadav is a daily wage worker from Giridih, Jharkhand. He was stuck in **Lonavala in Maharashtra**. The police station where the registration was happening was the Lonavala main market police station which was 27 kms away. He was informed that

he needed a medical certificate to submit at the police station. When he went to get the medical certificate at the small hospital about 14 kms away, he was told they were not issuing certificates any more. Because there was no certainty about the trains, he was worried he would not be able to get home. At one point he received reliable news that he could get a truck in Bhiwandi which was about 100 kms away. Mahendra walked from Lonavala to Bhiwandi. When he failed to get a truck, he walked to Nasik about 130 kms away and from there got a truck to Jharkhand. **The Jharkhand app for Rs 1,000 cash transfer for migrants did not accept Mahendra's selfie because his beard had grown- he could not shave and his picture on the Aadhaar card was without a beard. He tried 8-9 times and yet it did not work. He called several helplines but got no useful response from them. He used his savings and paid around Rs 600 for food on the way.** When he finally reached his village he was sent to a school that was the quarantine centre but food had to be arranged from his own house.

Abdul Rezzak and six of his friends paid Rs 4,200 per person to get a truck from **Thane city, Maharashtra**, to Murshidabad in West Bengal. Their families sent them the money. They also had to pay Rs 100 to do their medical test. The truck, filled with about 55 people, went from Thane to Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and then West Bengal. In Madhya

‘In Madhya Pradesh, the truck driver started harassing some of the workers who had not yet paid the full amount. Abdul said he dialled 100 and the police arrived immediately and told the driver not to trouble the workers as they had not earned anything since the lockdown. In some places people were serving biscuits, even biryani.’

Pradesh, the truck driver started harassing some of the workers who had not yet paid the full amount. Abdul said he dialled 100 and the police arrived immediately and told the driver not to trouble the workers as they had not earned anything since the lockdown. In some places people were serving biscuits, even biryani. In Uttar Pradesh, some people offered chapati and curry, but in Bihar they did not receive any food assistance. The truck was allowed to go till Asansol border. In Asansol, the workers filled a form and took a state-run bus free of cost to reach their respective districts. Once in Murshidabad, Abdul and his friends got a free medical test done and got a certificate for home quarantine.

Sanjay from Bhiwandi in **Thane, Maharashtra** and four others of his group paid Rs 4,000 per person to travel by truck from Bhiwandi to Muzaffarpur, Bihar. They borrowed this money from their contractor. The permit was made by the truck driver, the workers carried their Aadhaar cards and certificates of the medical test they had done in Bhiwandi. The truck dropped them at Muzaffarpur, Bihar, where there was a registration camp. After they registered themselves, they got a free medical test done and were given the option of home quarantine or staying at a quarantine centre. They chose to stay at the centre which is a big school. Here they were given food and had access to clean water.

Anoop Lal was stuck in **Surat, Gujarat**. He had filled an online registration form on May 20th to go on a Shramik train to Bihar. He claims that the ticket issued against his name was sold to someone else. He borrowed money and paid around Rs 4,000 to get on a bus to the Bihar border. After reaching the border he had to hitchhike to complete the journey. He has spent around Rs 6,000 in all. After reaching his village, he had to search for the quarantine centre. He was sent to another village, where the quarantine centre was full and was then asked to go home and remain in quarantine there. He did not receive any help from the government of Bihar. In Surat, where he had been stranded he had received no support from the government for rations and said that cooked food was available on a few occasions.

Several groups have tried to get home using private transport and paying large sums of money. A family of five left on a private vehicle from **Noida in Uttar Pradesh** to Aurangabad in Bihar paying Rs 2,500 per person. On arrival they were quarantined in Pipraura Panchayat, Madanpur, Aurangabad but no facilities including food was provided in the quarantine centre.

Ibrahim Ansari who used to stay in **Manesar, Gurgaon** had to leave his room as the landlord cut his electricity and water supply. Along with others he had planned on walking till Bihar from Manesar. When they reached

Ghaziabad, the police stopped them and sent them back to Manesar via bus. Now they are staying at a place in Kadipur, Manesar, still desperate to return home to Bihar.

Bablu Kumar travelled via bus from Gurgaon, Haryana to Samastipur in Bihar with seven members including three children. He had already paid Rs 1,700 per person, and had no money to buy food on the way.

A Tedious and Costly Journey Ending with Issues of Quarantine

Vikas Kumar left from **Bhiwandi, in Maharashtra** to Muzaffarpur, Bihar on May 12th at 1.30 am. He paid Rs 3,500 for the truck, and the money was sent by his family back home. The truck reached the Bihar border on May 13th around 10.30 pm. At the border, the truck was not allowed to enter, and the workers were told to walk toward a help centre where they could get a state transport bus to their district. The workers walked nearly 3 kms and reached the help centre tent. There they saw that people had queued up to get registered for the bus, but no physical distancing norms were being followed. The workers realised that joining the queue was a major health risk and decided not to get registered. They called their families and asked them to arrange a truck. They then walked to a petrol pump a few kilometres away and spent the night there. The truck arrived at 6.30

am and took them to Muzaffarpur where they finally arrived on May 14th and underwent thermal scanning. The quarantine facility where they were taken was a government school where they were required to stay for 21 days. They have been told that they would get two meals a day of rice, dal and vegetables, and tea and biscuits twice. However, facilities at the centre were very poor with frequent power outages, no bedding, few fans and no clean water. The workers demanded to speak to the headman of the village who did visit them but left angrily. The workers had said they would not eat until their demands were met, and no food was prepared that night at the school.

Juber Ansari and his group paid Rs 4,000 per person to travel by truck from **Ulhasnagar, Mumbai in Maharashtra** to Hazaribagh in Jharkhand. Their contractor had not paid them money, and told them to go back to their villages if they could arrange transport ('Jisko jaisa suvidha milta hai chale jao'). Juber said that if the contractor had continued paying them some money they would have stayed (Agar Rs. 500-500 deta toh hum rukte... nahi diya uske baad hi aap logon ko pareshaan kiya). They had borrowed the money for travel from their village at 10 percent interest per month. On their way home, in Maharashtra they were getting food at some places. In Chhattisgarh they could not get anything and had to buy biscuits to eat. At some places they

‘facilities at the centre were very poor with frequent power outages, no bedding, few fans and no clean water. The workers demanded to speak to the headman of the village who did visit them but left angrily. The workers had said they would not eat until their demands were met, and no food was prepared that night at the school.’



The kit provided by the Bihar government to migrants in a quarantine centre

saw the police stopping trucks and asking drivers to give a lift to migrant workers who were walking on foot. Juber's truck dropped them till Ranchi from where they hitchhiked taking a milk van, bikes, and other vehicles to reach Hazaribagh. They were placed in a quarantine centre in Hazaribagh where a medical test was done. They were living 14 to a room, and the centre was not providing them with food, which was being brought to them by their families. Juber had heard that other districts, quarantine centres were providing not only food but also some money to the quarantined people at Rs 250 a day but this is not clear.

Ranjeet and Sanjeev Ram, two brothers left Khandsa in Gurgaon,

Haryana, on May 14th at 9.30 pm and started walking along the highway with 40 others from their village in Madhubani, Bihar. The brothers boarded a truck at Palwal paying Rs 2,500 per head to the truck driver and via Agra, Lucknow, Gorakhpur, and Gopalgunj reached their village in Madhubani on May 16th. Fortunately for them food was being provided free along the route. At the village they were quarantined in the school where his family sent him food and provided bedding as there were no facilities even masks and sanitisers at the quarantine centre.

Ashok Kumar left Khandsa in Haryana on May 22nd at 10.30 pm. He walked from Khandsa to Palwal, took a truck from Palwal to Darbanki from

where he took a minibus to Lucknow via Agra. From Lucknow he took a bus to Gorakhpur and a bus again to Khusinagar. The cost of the journey by truck was Rs 3,500 and he ate food only twice during the entire journey. He was sent to a quarantine facility at the Primary Vidyalaya, Chauri Chora where no facilities were provided. The Pradhan of the village said that 'Hamari zimmedari nahi hai.' ('It is not our responsibility'). His family is sending food.

Arun Yadav after a long and arduous journey from **Delhi** to Bihar with no food, was quite unwell on arrival. He has been in a quarantine centre for 11 days now. After a week in one quarantine centre in his home panchayat, he was shifted to a centre in another panchayat, further away. Arun told the SWAN volunteer that he has received a kit from the Bihar government which consisted of a mosquito net, a gamcha or towel, mug, bucket, a glass, plate, toothpaste and two soaps. He has consistently been calling SWAN to say that food is delayed every morning and only arrives when people start agitating. On a positive note, officials from the block and panchayat visited the quarantine centre to register his demand for work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA). He will start working once he is released from the quarantine centre. On the eleventh day he was taken for testing and is now awaiting results before he

can be cleared to go home.

Many workers had to walk from different parts of Gurgaon, Haryana, to Palwal (about 75 kms), along the highway. They barely had food while they walked, eating only once or twice throughout their journey. Most of them managed to board a truck or tempo from Palwal.

Niranjan Kumar left from **Gurgaon, Haryana**, on May 14th. He walked till Palwal in Haryana where a police officer helped him board a truck to Bihar that had around 40 to 50 people. Along the route he did not have to pay for food as free food was being provided (by a local MLA). He reached Jehanabad in Bihar on May 20th and asked the pradhan to make arrangements for quarantine in a school, which however was not done.

Cost Incurred for Private Travel

Mode of transport	From	To	Rate (Rs. Per person)
Truck	Sonipat, Haryana	Araria, Bihar	2,500
Bus	Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh	Godda, Jharkhand	5,000
Truck	Hisar, Haryana	Nawada, Bihar	1,800
Truck	Kankrola, Haryana	Muzzaffarpur, Bihar	4,400
Truck	Delhi	Bhagalpur, Bihar	2,000
Truck	Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh	Mungeli, Chhattisgarh	1,000
Truck	Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh	Chhattisgarh	500
Private vehicle	Rajnandgaon, Chhattisgarh	Damoh, Madhya Pradesh	1,100
Truck	Chityala, Telangana	Jharkhand.	900
Truck	Chityala, Telangana	Odisha	1,500
Truck	Bhiwandi, Maharashtra	Giridih, Jharkhand	2,800
Truck	Thane, Maharashtra	Murshidabad West Bengal.	4,200
Truck	Bhiwandi, Maharashtra	Muzaffarpur, Bihar	4,000
Bus	Surat, Gujarat	Bihar border	3,500
Private vehicle	Noida, Uttar Pradesh	Aurangabad, Bihar	2,500
Private car	Gurgaon, Haryana	Madhubani, Bihar	5,000
Bus	Gurgaon, Haryana	Samastipur, Bihar	1,700
Truck	Bhiwandi, Maharashtra	Muzaffarpur, Bihar	3,500
Truck	Ulhasnagar, Maharashtra	Hazaribagh, Jharkhand	4,000
Truck	Palwal, Haryana	Madhubani, Bihar	2,500
Truck and Bus	Palwal, Haryana	Khusinagar, Bihar	3,500
Bus	Bengaluru, Karnataka	Odisha and Jharkhand	6,000
Mini Bus	Chennai, Tamil Nadu	West Bengal	9,500
Bus	Bengaluru, Karnataka	Odisha	5,000
Bus	Yadgir, Karnataka	Madhya Pradesh	6,000
Pick-up truck	Ranga Reddy Telangana	Bihar	5,000

The travel travails of workers further underscore the trauma that they have been subjected to by the state machinery. Extreme precarity begets multiplicity of expressions. While some workers have responded with resistance and anger, some others have expressed resignation. Given the array of shocks and risks that the working poor, and women in particular, are exposed to, the need for a comprehensive evaluation and implementation of social protection measures made by the erstwhile National Commission for the Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector (NCEUS) is critical. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), 1966, is an international human rights treaty in which India is a signatory. Anchoring on human dignity, ICESCR lays out the need for certain fundamental rights and freedoms for everybody. It is, therefore, high time that we reconfigure our society and strengthen our laws based on these principles instead of the proposed dilution of labour laws.

Previous SWAN Reports

21 Days and Counting - SWAN
Report (1) published April 15th 2020

32 Days and Counting - SWAN
Report (2) published May 1st 2020

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Published on - June 4th, 2020

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Annexures: *These are a sample of three letters written by SWAN to government officials. SWAN members have written several other letters to various MPs and MLAs that are not presented here. Letter 1 is addressed to the Secretary, MHA. Letter 2 is written by Mr. Jignesh Mevani, MLA, Vadgam, Gujarat to the Chief Minister of Gujarat on behalf of SWAN. Letter 3 is addressed to the CM of Maharashtra written by SWAN volunteers.*

Letter 1: To Shri Ajay Bhalla, Secretary, Ministry of Home Affairs.

To

May 11th, 2020

Shri Ajay Bhalla
Secretary,
Ministry of Home Affairs
Government of India

Subject: Suggestions for SOP regarding travel for migrant workers

Dear Sir,

We are a group of researchers, students, lawyers, engineers and civil society workers that have been coordinating and directly providing relief to stranded migrant workers after the lockdown was announced on March 24th. Simultaneously we have also built <https://migrants.covid-india.in/> and other digital platforms (details in the endnotes) for workers and others to make information on travel and relief measures widely available and accessible. Since March 27th, we have supported over 46,000 migrant workers by connecting them with civil society organisations and have tried government facilities to reach them in addition to some emergency cash transfers. In the process we have documented their needs and experiences and also collaborated with state governments to set up helplines. The MHA has issued multiple inter-state travel orders from April 29th. The latest order, dated May 11th, spells out a Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) for inter-state travel for workers.

We are writing to you to work collaboratively and enable better coordination across states for migrants to travel back to their native place. There are two specific areas where your intervention can significantly improve processes and ameliorate hardships faced by migrants. These are for your urgent consideration.

- Based on our experiences, we wish to share that the SOP issued in its

current form is incomplete. We want to share some key insights and offer a set of measures to fill the gaps in the current SOP.

- Support a common data portal for migrants to register their travel request. It will also take data from existing state specific mobile apps. The portal in turn interfaces with all stakeholders involved in planning and support in their journey including medical staff, police, district authorities of both states and the railways.

Review of Existing State Portals and Procedures

Since the April 29th order issued by MHA that permitted inter-state travel for stranded migrants we have been closely tracking orders and official announcements on migrant related travel and have been assisting migrants navigate this information and procedures. We present some important observations regarding this.

1. Variation in information collected by state portals and need for standardisation:
 - While some basic information like name/identity/contact information/addresses are common across registrations forms on state portals, there is also considerable variation. For example: Haryana asks for an employer name, some states ask for the industry sector and Karnataka asks for the duration of stay in the place of work, Gujarat asks for an NOC from the state the migrant is travelling from and so on.
 - Requirements for uploading photos and scans of IDs in different file formats is making the registration processes unnecessarily difficult.
 - Based on specific state requirements, migrants have to register twice: on the portal of the state they are travelling from as well as the state they want to go to. Some states have specifically waived off the double registration at both ends. For example, Rajasthan has said it will not ask for registration for coming into the state unless the state of origin of travel specifically asks for an NOC. Most states are not clear about this though leaving many people confused about the process.
 - In some cases, for example, people have managed to travel from Karnataka to Jharkhand without being registered on the portal and have had to pay Rs 1,000 for the journey.
2. Portals for two crucial states, Delhi and Bihar are not functional
 - It was difficult to trace the registration link for migrants stranded in Delhi. The link has not been posted on the official website of the Delhi government but is on the website of the Delhi Shelter board (<https://www.delhishelterboard.in/covid19/migrant-info.php>)

- Bihar government's portal has been non-functional since MHA announced that migrants will be permitted to travel
3. Post registration processes unclear, leading to increased anxiety
 - After registering on state portals, like Jharkhand, migrant workers did not receive any confirmation.
 - For those who successfully register, there is no tracking mechanism for them to know about their own application status.
 - Policies being followed to prioritise selection of travelers are not transparent.
 - Procedures for travel post-registration are either unavailable or do not meet the requirements of migrant workers. In the case of West Bengal, people who filled the form to return to Jharkhand received a notification asking for private vehicle information.
 - Schedules of trains are published by only some states and in an ad hoc manner. There are no public spaces, mechanisms, or specific portals for this sharing and no further efforts made to ensure that this critical piece of information reaches the affected parties.
 4. **Emerging black market for tickets:** In the absence of information on the number of trains that will run, schedules, transparent processes for seat allotment, a black market has developed overnight. Migrants have reported paying between Rs. 1500-8000 per person to register for travel by private bus and trains. The costs vary by distances.

Suggested Immediate Measures: Issue SOP, in consultation with states, to standardise migrant travel procedures:

Such a SOP can minimally consist of the following basic features.

Dissemination of Information, Facilitation Centres and Registration Procedure

Standardise online and offline registration processes as far as possible. Also specify the need for a system of announcements for the information to reach the affected people. Creation of multiple facilitation centres for this is critical. Transportation (bus and train) must be free for any migrant worker who wishes to return.

- Each ward in every city should organise widespread announcements informing them about facilitation centres where migrants can register to travel, travel time and how long they will need to spend in the quarantine centres. Registration should include name, contact details, source, and destination.
- Multiple spaces (schools, colleges, malls, marriage halls, army areas etc.) must be used to create such facilitation centres. They should have several

registration counters that should be open from 0600 to 2100 to ensure that physical distancing is maintained. Each such facilitation centre should have separate dedicated counters for some high density states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal.

- Given the large proportion of migrant workers who do not have smart phones or internet, officials should register on behalf of those who wish to travel, give them a dated receipt for the registration and simultaneously enter the travel details on a single co-ordinated web-based platform.
- A single well-coordinated web-based technology platform/app should also be used to log basic details of the workers at the registration centres and otherwise. This will feed directly into the information gathered from the facilitation centres, which will use the same platform/app. Some minimum features of such a platform are mentioned below.
- Registration must not have conditionalities. It should only be based on the workers' choice to return home and not the will of the states on who should move.
- Any government ID of one individual in the group can be used to attest the details of all the people registered in the group. Workers should not be asked to make photocopies/scans/photos of their government id cards. The officials may check the ID at the time of registration and log the details.
- Specify criteria for prioritisation for travel such as if somebody is pregnant, sick, weak, stressed and if there are children in the family or single women and this should be widely publicised, not only online but in each ward of every town/city.
- The portal should allow all those who have registered online and offline to track their application status in addition to messages being proactively sent to their phones via sms.
- Clarify that the onus of issuing passes and testing should lie with the state from which the migrant is travelling. Registration in the home state should only be done on arrival. Further testing and quarantining procedures as per WHO standards should be set up in the home states upon arrival.

Logistics – Reaching the Station, Arrangements for the Journey and Final Destinations

- From the registration process, the total number of those stranded and their destinations can be collated. This will inform the governments of the minimum number of trains/buses required, as well as the routes that need to be arranged. Lists of migrants cleared for travel should be provided to home states on a daily basis to make adequate preparations

for arrival.

- Special feeder buses and intra-state feeder trains need to be used to transport people from each ward to the station. Since the number of passengers in each train and the time of arrival is well known in advance, the home state should organise adequate numbers of buses/trains keeping physical distancing norms in mind for transportation within the home states.
- There should be three-stage check-ups for all those travelling: (1) Before the journey (2) during the journey (3) after the journey, at the destination. Multiple medical teams must be in each train throughout the journey. At each transit/exit point, there should be strict testing. Quarantine facilities must be available at each transit point so that anybody exhibiting COVID-19 symptoms can be quarantined immediately. Every transport facility must be sanitised.
- Each train should run with the maximum number of coaches as possible. Hot, cooked food should be provided for all passengers on board free of cost. Having multiple pantry cars can help ensure physical distancing in the kitchen as well.
- Once trains reach the border of a home state, they should stop at several reasonably big stations inside the state, and not just the state capital.
- States should draw up their own SOPs for all procedures upon arrival including thermo testing, quarantining, providing rations etc.

Public Disclosure of Information/Grievance Redressal

- Train schedules, details of feeder buses connecting to train stations, boarding points, passenger lists and waiting lists must be made transparent and publicly available in multiple spaces in each ward and online on a continuous basis. The tickets should be free for the workers.
- Each public registration centre should act as a worker facilitation centre. Each such centre must be provided with time-bound grievance redressal structure. SOP for grievance registration and redressal must be a part of the SOP for travel and logistics. Grievance collection procedures must be decentralised and not rely only on a single helpline number.

On the issue of migrants the different Court directives are as follows:

1. In a case before the Bombay High Court PIL(ST)5443-20, PIL(L) 22-20, PIL(L)25-20 the court on Friday May 6th, directed the Maharashtra government to take a decision on whether it would bear transport costs of migrant workers returning to their home states amid lockdown. The court also suggested that the government should publicise the decision

so that migrant workers learn about it. Based on this all states should be given a timeline to make this decision and share it widely with the public.”

2. The Karnataka High court in the case W.P. No.6435 of 2020 CJ / BVNJ: & Connected matters directed the state to place on record in what manner the state is going to arrange for operation of special trains for the benefit of migrants. If there are complaints received by the state that some contractors or employers are confining the migrant workers to their shelters and are not permitting them to go to their respective home states, the state government will have to attend to such complaints and will have to ensure that the migrants are not harassed in this fashion. The Court further directed that the policy of the state government should take care of all categories of migrant workers irrespective of the fact whether they are in their own shelters or in shelters provided by their employers or shelters provided by the state or whether they are on streets.
3. On May 8th, accepting an application filed by the Ministry of Home Affairs, the [Supreme Court held](#) that for migrants to go to their native state it is not compulsory for them to test negative before they are allowed.

We now outline some basic features that a single web-based platform must minimally have. Our team of technologists would be happy to work with the MHA in designing and developing such a web-based platform.

Minimum Features for a Single All India Portal for Migrant Travel Registration

1. Basic information, standardised across states should be collected by a single portal for ease of data compatibility and collaboration.
2. Data from existing registrations on state portals should be migrated first to the single portal
3. Information collected through offline registration processes (police stations etc) should be entered on the same portal by the officials in a time-bound manner.
4. The portal could include work-flow features such as verification and approval of migrant traveler lists by district authorities, assigning lists to state authorities to generate requests for trains, matching trains to passengers and sending travel related information to migrant workers.
5. This portal should be developed in consultation with the Ministry of Labour to serve as a starting point for building a record of migrant workers, who are particularly vulnerable.
6. The portal can be developed in collaboration with different stakeholders by taking up an ongoing effort between two states to ensure that it meets their needs. The single portal can be piloted first with states like Tamil

Nadu, Karnataka and Jharkhand who are currently working on the logistics. .

7. There is an urgent need for a coordinated grievance redressal and helpline mechanism and that needs to have information from across states and ideally should be coordinated by the Centre. Creation of a national helpline and help desks to support all migrants is therefore essential.
8. The registration of workers on the portals should be unconditional. At present many states are only allowing migrants who have been detained on the way in shelter homes, schools or other kinds of accommodation provided by the government.

We hope that the MHA considers these minimal set of measures outlined above regarding the travel for those workers who wish to return. We are also happy to participate in any consultative role that is appropriate and suitable for the MHA in this regard.

Sincerely,

On behalf of the Stranded Workers Action Network
Anindita Adhikari (9871832323) (aninditaadhikari@gmail.com),
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On behalf of covid-india.in
Aditya Srivastava (9810389569) (aditya.nlu@gmail.com)

On behalf of GramVaani
Aaditeshwar Seth (aseth@gramvaani.org)

On behalf of CoAST India
Vivek S., LibTech (vivekdse@gmail.com)

On behalf of Revitalising Rainfed Agriculture Network
Minhaj Ameen (minhajameen@gmail.com),

Endnotes

1. Based on a desk review of orders and announcements and clarifications from nodal officers (where we were able to get through) we have compiled information on <https://migrants.covid-india.in/>, available in 8 languages. We are a group of activists, researchers, lawyers and students who came together to collectively track the rapidly evolving situation after the nation-wide lockdown was announced in light of COVID-19 outbreak.
2. [Gram Vaani](#) operates several voice-based media platforms that facilitate information sharing among users, and also facilitates grievance redressal and response via a network of community volunteers. During the period of the lockdown, over 100K users have accessed information through 500K phone calls, contributed over 6000 voice reports about ground realities, and over 500 testimonials have been reported about access to relief measures facilitated by community volunteers.
3. The [Covid Action Support Team \(CoAST\)](#) was formed in April 2020. It is a collaboration of civil society organizations who are working together to ensure that citizens (especially migrant and vulnerable sections) are able to receive help and relief during the COVID-19 lockdown and thereafter. The platform connects those in distress with nearest relief - either government or civil society organisations.

Letter 2: Written by Mr. Jignesh Mevani, MLA Vadgam, Gujarat to the CM of Gujarat on behalf of SWAN

To,

20 May 2020

Shri. Vijay Rupani,
Chief Minister,
Gujarat State

Subject: Plight of the migrant workers in Surat, Ahmedabad, Vadodara who want to return home

Respected sir,

I am writing to bring to your attention the plight of migrant workers stranded in several parts of Gujarat. In particular, I want to highlight the cases of about 70000 workers who are stranded in Mora and Hazira in Surat. In addition to these, I have specified the details of the several other groups of workers in other parts of Gujarat. It seems that all these 70,000 workers are caged and confined so that their cheap labour can be used by the companies, the state of Gujarat is in connivance with. Is there a design on your part to create some sort of modern day slavery to entertain the capitalist greed of your friends?

I would urge you to take immediate action to send these workers back home and take care of their food and medical needs until they are in our state. We have a responsibility to take care of them & facilitate their travel during this very difficult lockdown.

Volunteers of Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), Public Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL) and Gujarat Sarvodaya Mandal (GSM) have reached out to me to help these workers. I have personally spoken to some of the migrant labourers stranded in Mora and Hazira. In this region, about 70000 migrants who work in companies like Larsen & Tubro, Reliance, NTPC and Essar. Several of these workers have not received food or their wages in the period of the lockdown. Now they are desperate to return to their homes, closer to their families.

No Wages, Food Security & Eviction

We have found that all of the workers who we spoke with have not received wages since the lockdown from the company they were employed at companies such as A.J Engineering and Arvind Engineering, that were

subcontracted by Larsen & Toubro Pvt. Ltd. two such persons have still not received wages for work done before and during the lockdown. The industries are running at a low capacity, and the few workers working there during the lockdown receive only lunch. The panchayat support has been woefully inadequate — some workers report that they received only ten days of ration in the lockdown which has extended for over 50 days. Many of the workers have been threatened by their landlords that they will be evicted. In one case, the water supply of the household has been cut off.

Travel to Home States

The administration has stalled the returning process for over 10 days. In addition to that workers are saying that they are being charged Rs. 700 per head to go back home. Instead of ensuring their timely payment of wages and adequate ration, we have been responsible for keeping them poor, hungry and desperate to go home. A worker said to us that he would rather have “namak and roti” with his parents than suffer here.

Details of Stranded Workers

Hazira & Mora, Surat: Tens of thousands out of 70000 stranded workers want to return to Jharkhand & Bihar. Contact Person: Anushka Kale: +91 7619404770

Group of 70 people trying to get to Jharkhand, UP, Bihar, many had registered multiple times, waited for the promised intimation from authorities on when a train was scheduled. They got no information from the authorities. The Dy. Collector or the Collector, Vadodara did not even speak to the people of Gujarat Sarvodaya Mandal who went to ask for help for the workers. They have been kept in the dark completely, as to when they will be able to return. Contact Person: Anand: +91 94083 09197

More than 350 migrant workers from Garhwa, Palaumu and other parts of Jharkhand are stranded in Ahmedabad. Contact Person: Nitish Kumar: +91 8800725131

It is my humble request that the State Government should take the following steps to ensure the safe return of our migrant brothers and sisters.

The Police Department should put in the public domain the process of registration, date & timings of the transport available. Furthermore, there should be a wide dissemination of the selection process for return journeys. They must also make available the details of the workers who have registered to go back.

On registration, each worker should get a dated acknowledgement receipt, which will serve as a guarantee that the Government of Gujarat will ensure

their safe return.

The Government of Gujarat should immediately request trains for workers to go back. This should be free of cost for the migrants. For specific districts like Jaunpur from which a lot of migrants belong, special trains should be arranged. While they are on the train, food and medical supplies should be provided.

The workers have been very reluctant and scared to share their stories with us. I request you to ensure that these cases are dealt with utmost empathy and sensitivity. Kindly ensure that the workers of Hazira, Mora, Ahmedabad & Vadodara do not have to endure any more physical and mental abuse. Let us take prompt action and treat them with respect and dignity.

Yours sincerely,

Jignesh Mevani,
MLA, Vadgam -II

Letter 3: Letter to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra

May 20th 2020

To, Shri. Uddhav Thackeray Hon'ble Chief Minister, Government of Maharashtra

Subject: Suggestions regarding ration and travel arrangements of migrant workers in Maharashtra

Dear Sir,

We are writing on behalf of Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), a group of civil society workers, academicians, students and professionals that have supported migrant workers navigate the lockdown. Since March 27th, we have helped over 27,000 migrant workers across India gain access to rations, emergency cash transfers, and information on travel arrangements by connecting them to governmental and non-governmental agencies. In the process, we have documented their needs and experiences and released two reports on April 15th and May 1st.

We must begin by acknowledging the enormous challenge faced by the Government in responding to COVID-19. We appreciate your prioritisation of ensuring the health and safety of all residents of Maharashtra and also citizens of Maharashtra who are outside the state borders. We would like to extend our support to the government's efforts in fighting the pandemic. Outlined here are some observations regarding roadblocks in the current strategy and suggestions to overcome them.

Observation of current processes and its effects:

I. Workers have run out of money, ration, loans and dignity:

We have seen the spirit of the workers devolve from grit to indignation. Most of the workers have run out of their savings. They have been surviving on the charity of fellow workers, or NGOs, which have also exhausted their reserves. The cooked food provided to them is insufficient in most cases and runs out by the time the workers line up. Due to the heat and humidity, many workers have complained that the food served has been spoiled. In effect, most of the workers are not able to feed themselves even one complete meal per day. Based on our interactions with about 5000 workers, 95 percent have not received any rations from the government despite trying.

2. Workers are eagerly waiting for affordable transport arrangements: On Labour Day, the Ministry of Home Affairs announced the arrangement of Shramik Express to transport the workers to their respective states. The news came as relief to all the workers and they followed the protocol set by the Maharashtra government. The necessity of a medical certificate punched a big hole in the worker's pockets. Yet, most workers paid for medical tests before the announcement to waive off the certificate was made. Thousands of workers are now out of money and are waiting helplessly for updates from the police stations. The government must ensure that the workers who wish to return should be sent home in a dignified manner, free of cost. There is also confusion regarding the availability and reach of MSRTC busses. The GR dated 9.5.20 (Sr.No 202005121419281519) generously offers transportation to all workers to their home-states, and states that a sum of Rs. 21 Cr. was allocated for this purpose. Yet there have been no operational busses from most areas including Mumbai, and those that have gone, only dropped the workers at the border. The same circular also states that this service will operate until 17th May only. This may be too short a period. Given the number of migrants in Maharashtra we estimate that evacuations will last much longer. The trickle of workers walking to their home states is now turning into an avalanche that will bring catastrophic hardships on them as well as on the law keepers and citizens that they pass along the way home.

3. Incomplete and delayed communication leading to panic: Differing information on offline and online procedures and processes for travel are causing confusion and panic amongst the workers. The schedules of the trains and buses are not public, leading to crowding and protests by workers.

There have been reports of impolite behavior and misconduct on the part of some law-enforcement officials, ranging from illegal selling of registration forms, to workers being beaten up for enquiring about the status of trains. Workers must be able to look for help without threat and fear.

Suggested Action Points:

Given our observations on-ground, we are making the following suggestions:

1. For ration and daily necessities of workers:
 - a. Each ward should ensure that the workers residing in them are provided

with ration kits and stove fuel to sustain their stay until transportation is provided.

b. The Centre has announced that migrant workers can access rations through PDS shops without possessing a local ration card. The procedure for this should be disclosed and widely publicized, and corresponding measures should be taken to equip PDS shops with adequate rations.

c. Community kitchens must be examined every week by municipal functionary to ensure quality food. To ensure correct estimates, they may register the workers in a suitable manner.

2. For transport of workers:

a. Actively pursue mutual coordination and planning with home-states of workers to boost the Shramik train services.

b. Government of Maharashtra should arrange free of cost travel by train for the stranded workers, as many other State governments have declared.

c. Extend the facility of free transport by MSRTC busses for at least two months to ensure complete evacuation.

d. Make public, the schedules of trains and MSRTC busses to avoid confusion and chaos arising out of rush and desperation. Ensure there are lists put up outside every police station and public place.

There should also be announcements on loud speakers like the police have already been doing about other health safety measures.

e. The police stations and other nodal offices must be updated everyday with correct information. Communication between the arms of the government can be improved so that any contradictory information is rapidly corrected. A board must be placed in the premises of these offices displaying the latest government orders and transport schedules in Marathi as well as Hindi.

f. Provide clear guidelines and information for obtaining clearances for travel by private vehicles, for those who choose to do so.

g. Rather than concentrating all facilitation and registration at one venue, i.e Police stations, distribute the crowds evenly by using other government buildings such as schools, colleges, stadiums etc. This will ensure better adherence of social distancing rules. Whether the registration process is on

paper or online, workers should get an acknowledgement receipt.

h. We urge the government to communicate to all its officers the need for a sensitive approach towards the workers. Government agencies should prioritise proactive and empathetic communication with the workers.

3. For collaborative action with civil society:

a. Ask the district collectors, ward members and police department to actively share information on accessible social media such as Twitter. This will also serve as a communication channel to highlight important issues.

b. Local administration should initiate a meeting of representatives of local NGOs and civil society organisations to assess strengths and possibility of mutual collaboration. This will enable a synchronised effort in handling the crisis more effectively at the local level in the long-run.

Dear Sir, we hope that the Chief Minister's Office takes note of these suggestions and actively incorporates them in Maharashtra's response to the COVID crisis. We are happy to participate in any consultative role that is appropriate and suitable for the Government of Maharashtra in this regard.

Sincerely,

On behalf of Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN), Adwait Deshpande, (8275602122) (adwait.deshpande13@apu.edu.in) Sakina Dhorajiwala, (9833419391) (sakinahnd@gmail.com) Bhakti G., (8104617298) (bhaktiag20122@gmail.com) Anul Jain (9916296031) (writetoanul@gmail.com)
A copy of this letter has also been emailed to: 1. Shri. Ajoy Mehta – Chief Secretary, Government of Maharashtra 2. Shri. Vijay Kharage – Principal Secretary to Chief Minister of Maharashtra





End Notes

1 <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/FM/Issues/2020/04/17/Fiscal-Monitor-April-2020-Chapter-1-Policies-to-Support-People-During-the-COVID-19-Pandemic-49278>

2 (Writ petition (civil) Diary no 10801/2020) by Harsh Mander and Anjali Bharadwaj vs Union of India. The petition sought wage compensation for migrant workers in addition to food. Referring to the arbitrary order of the lockdown of 24th March, the petition argued that it resulted in large scale loss of wages and livelihoods and was a violation of Article 21 of the Indian Constitution- the right to life. In accordance with various progressive legislations such as the National Disaster Management Act (2005), the Inter State Migrant Worker Act (1979) among others, the petitioners further argued that 'If in violation of the necessary statutes, the governments have not maintained records of such workers, it would be necessary to immediately put in place a mechanism for workers to self-identify and self-attest based on which the government can release wages.'

3 <https://thewire.in/government/stranded-migrant-workers-rti>

4 https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/GNEM%20opresser_26April.pdf

5 https://www.huffingtonpost.in/entry/food-hunger-migrant-workers-piyush-goyal_in_5e1ea1a33c5b6ee0b69e85602

6 <https://cse.azimpremjiuniversity.edu.in/covid19-analysis-of-impact-and-relief-measures/>

7 <https://www.dvara.com/research/social-protection-initiative/covid-19-impact-on-daily-life/>

8 <https://thewire.in/law/supreme-court-migrant-workers-crisis-abdicate-responsibility>

9 Read full order here: http://images.assettype.com/barandbench/2020-05/beobccba-e155-4ff3-8dfa-5dc4003a8662/WPIL_A_583_2020_order_dated_May_26.pdf

10 Read the full order here: https://images.assettype.com/barandbench/2020-05/c140ce5f-05ae-4de1-86a2-589d621a97f5/Karnataka_order_Migrants_Transportation_May_21.pdf

11 <https://www.deccanherald.com/national/scathing-letter-by-senior-advocates-stir-up-sc-to-take-up-migrants-crisis-842599.html>

12 <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/railway-protection-force-reports-80-deaths-on-shramik-trains/story-psJl3EenY4BouUYMRvkChL.html>

