

Republic Day Parade Celebrates the Worker, Migrants Stranded During the Lockdown **Respond**

The Republic Day Parade this year features a tableau to pay tribute to workers of the country. The tableau is an attempt by the Ministry of Labour and Employment, [to portray the transformation that will come into the life of organised and unorganised workers after the implementation of the recent labour codes](#). While this tableau is a symbol of celebration, Mohammad Muslim, a migrant worker, recalling the government's apathy during the period of the COVID-19 lockdown said, "We did not have any safety. It was difficult for us. People were starving for weeks. Those who did not have any food left had to walk back home."

This tableau featuring a well-built male worker in protective gear and tools comes in the context when workers still [lack food sufficiency](#) across different states and [women workers are worst hit and struggling to find work](#). At the same time, it is important to recall that during the monsoon session of the parliament, the central government claimed it has no data on migrant deaths and loss of livelihoods. The government also said there was, "no question of giving compensation" to the next of kin of workers who had died owing to the lockdown. [Here is the Stranded Workers Action Network's response to the questions posed to the government in the parliament](#).

Meanwhile like many others, Sima and Mohd. Muslim, SWAN fellows and migrant workers from Jharkhand and Bihar who were stranded during the lockdown, are still struggling to find work and they respond to this "celebration" of workers on Republic Day. These two migrant workers received some financial support from SWAN during the lockdown to meet their basic needs and because of their leadership and fortitude are among the [six SWAN fellows](#) to contribute to public discourse and action for the well-being of migrant workers in India after a year when their precarious lives and livelihoods came into such sharp focus.

Here are a few excerpts from a conversation we had with SWAN fellows, selected from amongst the 36,000 workers who reached out for financial assistance during the lockdown. Commenting on the yellow helmet--a symbol of safety and security--prominently featured in the tableau SWAN fellows said that none had ever used any kind of safety gear in their work. It was clear that the worker in the tableau is not even representative of the kinds of jobs the informal workforce worst affected by the COVID-19 lockdown are engaged in. When asked if this metaphorical sense of safety had translated into reality in their lives today, they recalled the period of the sudden lockdown because of which thousands of migrant workers were forced to go back to their villages and expressed dismay and disappointment at their current lack of employment, let alone security. Sima, a frontline health worker recalled how although she dutifully worked every day for two months in a hospital in Goa while the pandemic was raging last year, she was not given any protective equipment. Mohd. Muslim who works in a puncture repair shop in Odisha personally identified with the male worker in a hard hat. However he drew a sharp distinction between himself and what he considered more formal work in "big factories" saying "The workers in the tableau are like us--we also use the wrenches such as the ones shown here. But we don't really have a dress code and don't use a protective helmet. Those working in large factories need protective gear, not us."

Sima, trained under the Pradhan Mantri Kaushal Vikas Yojana, talks about the harsh working conditions and lack of basic enforcement of payment of wages. She says, "What should I talk about safety? I feel that none of the female or male migrant workers have received any kind of security. Firstly, we have to move to different places looking for work. We have to leave our homes and families, our villages and go to faraway places for work. Besides that, we have to work for 12-24 hours. The people who make us work, the people for whom we work, they don't care about us. They only care about getting the work done. Even if we are working for them, the salary that they are supposed to pay us for our work is not proper. We went everyday for duty

but our salaries for two months were not paid to us. We had to fight a case for that. So what is this? What kind of security is this? I would like to ask the Labour Minister this question.”

The SWAN fellows comments need to be placed in the context of the recent labour codes and the wage rates that workers receive today. The three labour codes--Code on Social Security, Occupational Safety, Health and Working Conditions and the Industrial Relations Code--have been passed with little debate, and together subsume more than 40 labour laws. The [Working People's Charter](#) shows how the codes contradict the Labour Ministry's own Mission Statement and lack any social protection measures. Nearly 86% of the Indian economy is driven by the informal workforce that contributes an estimated [50% of the GDP](#), but a large section will be excluded from social security as per the new codes.

As Ishan Anand and Anjana Thampi show [here](#), around 45% of the regular workers earned less than Rs 10,000 a month and about 72% of the regular workers earned less than the minimum wages of Rs 18,000 per month prescribed by the 7th pay commission. Wages for informal workers are lower and more uncertain exposing them to more vulnerability. In August 2019, the government passed the Code of Wages Bill meant to improve workers' wages by subsuming several wage laws. However, on the contrary, as [argued here](#) by Nivedita Jayaram, among several problems, it ignores the methodology adopted by the Indian Labour Conference 1957, reiterated in 2012 and 2015 of arriving at minimum wages. It also undermines the Supreme Court verdict in the Raptakoss Brett case (1992) or arriving at a needs-based criteria for minimum wages. These will inevitably depress the worker wages and further increase the precarity. Moreover, the 'Indian Labour Conference (ILC)', the apex consultative committee involving trade unions, central organisations of employers, state governments etc concerned with labour, last met in 2015. Importantly, the necessary process of dialogue with workers and trade unions were bypassed, once again reminding us of the central government's disdain towards federal principles and democratic engagement.

Muslim appealed, “.. workers working in small factories should get proper wages. Labourers who face difficulties at home, due to sickness or for any other reasons, should get proper leave and facilities. But these things are not implemented.”

Unfortunately, the latest protections specifically put into place for migrant workers have yet again failed to meet these basic demands raised by Sima and Mohd. Muslim. The Insurance and pension coverage applies only to establishments with [ten or more inter-state migrant workers](#). Even basic protections like placement allowance, equality of working conditions, accommodation, medical facilities and evaluation won't be available to the majority of the workforce [as only 1.37%](#) of the total establishments has 10 or more workers. The tableau's slogan, "Mehnat ko samman, Adhikar ek samaan" (Respect for hard work, Equal rights for all) for now remains just that - a slogan which does not reflect any change in the lived experiences of migrant workers.

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