

Majboor hai isliye Majdoor hai: The plight of migrant workers

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Sumitsingh8254@gmail.com The plight of migrant workers stranded by India's sweeping coronavirus lockdown — and often forced to walk long distances to reach their hometowns — has emerged as a major humanitarian challenge during the pandemic. While a complete nationwide lockdown, announced at a four-hour notice through a televised address on March 24 evening, was considered a bold step in India's efforts to curb the Covid-19 pandemic, it left a large population of migrant workers stranded with almost no means of survival. After facing difficulties to meet basic ends without work, these migrants, lacking any means of transport, found no choice but to walk back home. Unfortunately, not all of them reached their respective destinations. A majority of migrant deaths in accidents took place during the third phase of the lockdown (May 4 – May 17) even though the government announced the 'Shramik Special' trains to ferry stranded migrant workers to their native places. The government has claimed that more than a million migrants have been ferried by over 1,000 'shramik specials' as on May 15. However, it may not be enough since thousands of laborers continue to walk as many could not manage to get a ticket for these 'special' trains, while others simply could not afford it. The phase 3 contributed to almost 60 per cent of all migrant worker deaths during the lockdown, while phases one, two and four witnessed 25, 17 and 38 deaths respectively. The death toll in road accidents among migrant workers reached at 159 between March 24 and May 18. Around 630 migrants were injured in these road mishaps. It is to be noted that these figures are based on accidents and incidents that were reported in the media and, therefore, the numbers are not exhaustive. The actual death toll could be higher. While the economic disruption caused by the pandemic and the lockdown remained a cause of concern, the failure to provide authoritative solutions for the unprecedented migrant crisis, even after more than 50 days of the lockdown, has raised questions over the planning of the country's Covid-19 response. In terms of states, Uttar Pradesh saw the maximum deaths of migrant workers with 94 deaths, while Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Telangana saw 38, 16 and 11 deaths respectively. The cause of deaths in maximum number of cases was found to be vehicle to vehicle collisions in which 70 migrants lost their lives. Speeding resulted in the death of 49 migrant workers while vehicle overturn resulted in the death of 32 migrant workers. On May 8, 16 migrant workers were crushed to death by a goods train when they were attempting to

make their way to Aurangabad railway station with the hope of catching a train to their homes in Madhya Pradesh. They were walking along the railway track to avoid being thrashed by the police on the roads and with the knowledge that trains aren't running. After walking for several hours, the workers were exhausted. They sat down to rest and fell asleep. An oncoming goods train ran over them at around 5.20 am. The migrants worked at a private steel company in Jalna in Maharashtra and had not been paid since the first lockdown began on March 24. Given the desperate situation and not knowing when they could work again, they wanted to get back home to be with their families and decided to walk in the hope of finding a train. At least eight died and 55 sustained injuries when a truck with migrants traveling in collided with a bus in Madhya Pradesh's Guna on May 14. Among one of the major and recent incidents, at least 24 migrant laborers were killed, while 37 others were left injured when a truck in which they were traveling in collided with another vehicle in Uttar Pradesh's Auraiya on May 16. Amid several videos showing the woes of migrant workers returning to Bihar these days, a chilling video went viral on social media. In it, a half-naked baby is seen playfully tugging at a sheet partially covering its dead mother at the Muzaffarpur Railway Station in Bihar. The woman is seen lying dead on the platform, with two bags stuffed with her belongings kept away from her. An older child, with a water bottle in hand, too appears for a moment in the video. The woman had reached the Muzaffarpur Railway Station on May 25 along with her two children, sister and brother-in-law. She was from Katihar district. She had arrived by a Shramik Special train from Ahmedabad. She collapsed immediately upon reaching the station, possibly due to extreme heat, hunger and dehydration. The woman is said to have boarded the train on May 23. Ten people died on May 23, nine each on May 24 and May 25, thirteen on May 26 and eight on May 27. Shocking visuals came from Bihar showed the police brutally thrashing migrant workers who had just arrived in the state by special Shramik trains. The State Government of Bihar, led by Chief Minister Nitish Kumar has been extremely vocal in criticising the Centre of its management concerning the migrants amid lockdown. The visuals show the unfortunate display of high-handedness by the police who were lathi charging migrants without any provocation at the railway station. The migrants had returned from Kerala to Bihar's Katihar railway station and were asking local authorities for transportation to their respective district. The officials then informed them that transport facilities had been closed. Every day, lakhs of migrant workers have been returning to their native home on foot, by trains, on buses, trucks, auto rickshaws, pick-up vans and bicycles — without proper source of food or water. Many are losing their lives to road accidents, hunger, dehydration and exhaustion before they reach home. Summing up the pain and misery of the migrant laborers whom we have failed, whom India's lockdown has failed with few lines from a bhojpuri folk song which is becoming quite popular and is very relevant in these trying times.

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