



Abandoned and Forsaken – the
Resilient Migrant Workers in
Telangana

Documentation Report

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Seeing through the government's lies

(Raju Rekhele, Balaghat, Madhya Pradesh)

All my bags are packed, I'm ready to go ...

Like every other year Raju awaited news for work from the contractor in the month of November. He would then pack a light bag, depending on the number of family members accompanying him - some utensils to cook, a few sheets to spread and cover their bodies while sleeping, some change of clothes, his adhar card, bank passbook, the ATM card. This year a smart phone he purchased at a nearby town was his treasured possession, which he would keep close to him in his breast pocket. An expensive possession, he purchased the smart phone for Rs. 7,000, but it stood in good stead.

Come November every year, his village Budbudha in Waraseoni Tehsil of Balaghat district in Madhya Pradesh wears a deserted look as most families from the 1,000 odd houses in the village depart to find work in big cities that promise to pay good wages – Hyderabad, Bangalore, Mumbai, Pune, Chennai and several others.

The Rekheles had no farmland; Raju, thus, has to migrate seasonally to other cities to earn and feed his family through the year. His immediate responsibilities were his elderly parents, his two-month pregnant wife, Kavita, and three-and-half year old daughter, Radhika. They always moved as a family. In fact, Raju told me, most of the time they were out working, returning to the village only when there was an emergency, or wedding or any festival. But with his daughter growing older and his wife expecting another child, he will have to gradually give up their nomadic life. The future stares blank at him; but for now, like every year, Kavita and he along with their little daughter Radhika will proceed to Bouduppall, a suburb near Hyderabad along with the other 26 from his village. His older brother, their two kids and his elderly parents stayed back in the village.

He did not know the thekedar (contractor) but his contact who has been working with the contractor for years offered 750 rupees per day. This sounded good. This includes the „kharchi“/khuraki (allowance) of Rs. 1,200 per week to help them buy the weekly ration. Of course, the kharchi amount will be deducted at the end of the work when the final payment is settled. The schedule suited Raju and the other villagers, who have been seasonally going to metro cities to work. Those who own land return to work in their agricultural field to get ready for kharif crop. Others like Raju who do not own any land wait for another visit outside his village and state to be called for work. Even those owning land, an average holding of 1 – 3 acres per family in the village, are compelled to find work outside.

Raju had studied until class 10 in his village school, but family circumstances did not allow him to study any further. Raju's wife Kavita has studied until class 8. Raju was joined, other than his wife and daughter, by 26 others to work at the construction site in Bouduppall. Work at the construction site was all too familiar – clear the debris from the mechanically destroyed building, wait till the foundation for the building is dug, throw hundreds of „tagada“ (flat vessel) of cement mixed with sand, into the foundation raising the beam to the required height. The iron rods are to be then secured before covering them up with wooden planks to hold the cement and sand mix that will be once again poured in to allow the beam to stand securely.



Careful „slab work“ is to be done to establish the number of floors to be erected. Slabbing or scaffolding work is one of the most dangerous forms of work at construction sites, as 25% deaths at construction sites occur from falling from a height. In fact, according to a research paper published in 2017,¹ construction sector contributes 24.20 per cent of occupational fatalities. Only 20 per cent of the country's 465 million workforce is covered under any health and safety legal framework.

Raju was one of the lucky ones not to have met with any serious accident, but he had heard of several people meeting with accidents at the construction sites, for which no compensation is paid.

While the women, including Raju's wife, mix cement and sand carrying the “tagadas” not less than 100 times a day, the men ensure the structure stays intact. The work is as gruelling and taxing as what the men do. However, the women get paid much less, 300 Rs as compared to 500 Rs for the men. Added to this, Kavita carried the burden of keeping a close watch on their little one. She had the propensity to run around the place along with the other kids in the work site, with all kinds of tools and building material strewn around. Kavita will have to keep her ears cocked for any whining sound to check if her child has been hurt. There were other younger babies amongst them who had just begun to walk. Their unsteady baby feet excited to break into a wobbly run whenever they see familiar faces at work kept the cheer, but made it difficult for the women to fully focus on the work. But the assigned work needs completion and the women have to contribute to the family income which gets a little difficult especially when the child is awake. Most women make up by getting up as early as 4 am to pour water on freshly cemented walls before they rush in for a quick bath and attend to nature's call. Despite her first trimester into pregnancy, she was keeping fine, she said; no vomiting sensation or any discomfort. She did not mind the work, so long as she can return on time with adequate cash to see them through the year.

But to the contractor, she does “lesser” work as she is neither able to fully concentrate on the work nor does she do “hard” work. Kavita accepts it, begrudgingly, like the other women and accepts nearly half of what the men get.

Work hours usually begin at six in the morning till about 8 in the night. A three-hour break for bathing, lunch and a little bit of rest helps them pull through the day of hard work before they crash on their chatais (mats) by 8 in the evening after a meal of dal and chawal with occasional vegetables.

However, this year's trip to work in the big city of Hyderabad was completely unusual and unprecedented for Raju. This was his first trip to Hyderabad; Raju was quite familiar with the way the construction industry works and the nexus the industry had with high profile politicians, in any city. The worker's desperation for work and his alienation from his place of residence often make him vulnerable to economic exploitation. Most workers are aware there is no support to turn to. Moreover, the worker is aware, as is the contractor, that for the next season, the worker is dependent on him for work again.

Few primary unstated rules most workers follow: Do not enter into any kind of scrap – big or small – with the contractor or supervisor. Any such “indulgence” would have the consequence of being excluded in the next season's work. And this certainly cannot be risked. Secondly, do not interfere, intervene or expect any support from other workers when you are bullied around or left unpaid unjustly. In times of scant work and desperation, collective support from fellow villagers can be rarely expected. Thus, most often, being scolded in front of everyone, sometimes even physically pushed around insultingly in front of family, friends and other co-workers, is swallowed with indignation. Payment is always done a day or so before return; what if he does not clear the payment or holds back some money under some pretext? Often when they leave, the person, mostly male, who is more vocal, a little educated and perhaps has the experience of having worked earlier with the same contractor, carries the telephone number of the contractor, scribbled in a

¹ “An estimate of fatal accidents in Indian construction” by Dilipkumar Patel and Kumar Neeraj Jha.

small piece of paper but kept securely. Rest of the workers, women especially, do not know who they are working for.

The thought of having an amount of Rs 80,000 in his bank account by the end of the seventh month apart from his family's living expenses in the city, helped Raju push the bad thoughts of unpredictable future deep inside. He had set off thus like every other year bidding farewell to his weeping nieces and nephews and his elderly parents promising to bring back some goodies for them from the Big City.

The terror of pandemic unleashed

On 19 March, Prime Minister Narendra Modi, in a nation-wide televised address called upon all to observe a day long (7 am to 9 pm) "[Janta Curfew](#)" to fight against Covid-19. Urging "each and every Indian to remain alert and cautious" the PM reminded the citizens that "whenever I asked you for something, you have never let me down". Although the appeal for the so-called "curfew" in his address was for one single day, he hinted in his speech of a longer haul.

"Today, I am here to ask you, all my fellow citizens, for something. I want your coming few weeks from you, your time in the near future", he appealed in his speech.

"This people's curfew will in a way be a litmus test for us, for our nation. This is also the time to see and test how prepared India is for fighting off a Corona like global pandemic", he said seeking fellow citizens' "determination" and "patience".

"The success of a people's curfew on 22nd March, and the experience gained from it, will also prepare us for our upcoming challenges", he added

Raju watched his speech later in his little phone. Although the Prime Minister addressed in Hindi in a very lucid language, Raju saw little threat of what lay ahead for him. He was aware some strange disease with a fancy name like Corona, was viciously spreading across the world and in India. The curfew has been imposed to put a check on the virus. Raju's thoughts were on his return in May, which was still two months away. A day's break in March, that too on a Sunday, is no big deal.

As was the practice, the contractor came the previous Saturday which was on 21st, a day before the Janta Curfew and paid up for the work done so far. What followed soon after the "Janta curfew" confounded Raju and all the others with him.

In Telangana, where Raju worked in the capital city of Hyderabad, Kalvakuntla Chandrashekhar Rao, popularly known as KCR, also an ambitious Chief Minister, had gone a few steps beyond the PM's announcement. Not only did he impose the Curfew in his state for 24 hours, from 6 AM on 22 March instead of the nationwide call for from 7 AM to 9 PM, but he further went on to extend the lockdown until [31 March](#).

Invoking the Epidemic Diseases Act, 1897, the chief minister declared,

"Everyone should stay at home till March 31. That is the only way to defeat coronavirus. Not more than five people can gather on the streets. Only one person should step out for buying groceries and other essentials."

Inter-state borders were closed and public transports including private passenger buses were brought to a standstill. Only goods transports were allowed. Promising to review the situation further on 31 March, the Chief Minister appealed to "companies" that payment for the lockdown be made to construction workers "It is a social responsibility. It is not enough to just look at profits during times like these", he said addressing the media. For daily wage earners he had announced a month's ration for white card holders. *In addition, each person was promised 12 kg of rice and Rs. 1,500 to each family as financial assistance for buying essential items. "For this, over 2,417 crore will be sanctioned by the state government",* the chief minister had announced.

A day before the Janta Curfew, all the trains, except goods trains, were suspended until end of March.

When the announcement for the Junta Curfew was made on 22 March, Telangana had reported [27 positive cases](#), while the country reported [360 confirmed cases](#) and seven deaths.

As construction sites at various places in Hyderabad and other satellite cities came to a grinding halt, Raju felt the panic – not of the disease, as from the information he gathered from his smartphone he felt safe. Those who had travelled to countries outside India were at risk of the infection. He and his family have stepped out only 700 km from his village to reach Hyderabad. His worry was the money for that week. No work means no money.

More lockdowns

The Chief Minister may have announced payment until 31 March, but he was sure the promised money will be an illusion, especially when his contractor informed that he had left for his village in Telangana and was unable to return to them.

Raju may have attended school only until class 10, but he was familiar with the federal structure of the country. Raju anxiously waited for the announcement from the central government, as the central government directions would have a bearing on the state governments.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi once again [addressed](#) the nation on 24 March at 8 in the evening. He applauded people like Raju for abiding by his appeal for “Janta Curfew”:

“Through one day of Janata Curfew, India proved that at the time of crisis befalling our nation, at the time of crisis befalling humanity, how each and every Indian comes together to put forth united efforts to deal with it.

All of you deserve praise for ensuring the success of Janata-Curfew”.

He apprised the situation of the pandemic across the globe: how advanced countries failed, despite their best health infrastructure, in containing the virus which was spreading at an unprecedented pace. Once the fear was instilled... he dropped the bombshell.

From midnight tonight onwards, the entire country, please listen carefully, the entire country shall go under complete lockdown.

In order to protect the country, and each of its citizens, from midnight tonight, a full ban is being imposed on people from stepping out of their homes.

All the States in the country, all the Union Territories, each district, each municipality, each village, each locality is being put under lockdown.

This “curfew” he announced with be stricter than the “Janta curfew” and a longer one for an entire three-week period, i.e. 21 days until 14 April. And this 21-day period, he explained, was in line with advice of health experts, which is to break the coronavirus cycle. Non-compliance of the 21-day period lockdown can push the country and its citizens 21 years behind, he warned and further threatened that it could even destroy families.

Timeline of Lockdown/Unlockdown Government of India	
	Dates
Janta curfew (6.00AM – 7.00 PM)	22 March 2020
Lockdown 1.0	24 March -14 April
Lockdown 2.0	14 April - 3 May
Lockdown 3.0	4 May - 17 May
Lockdown 4.0	17 May - 31 May
Unlock 1.0	1 June – 30 June
Unlock 2.0	1 July - 31 July

“Jaan hai to jahan hai”, (if there is life, there will be the world), the Prime Minister noted going back to the old adage and the only way to save one’s own life and that of the family, the Prime Minister said, is to “*Stay inside your home, stay inside your home, and do just one thing - stay inside your home*”.

Raju’s thoughts must have immediately rushed to his three little nieces and nephews who were home with his elderly parents. Home was 700 km away from where he was. What was currently available to him and his family including his three-and-half-year-old child and the others working at the construction site was a stack of bricks raised to make rooms. In the midst of cement, sand, construction tools and bamboos was a little corner that they had converted into a kitchen-cum-sleeping place.

The Prime Minister completely overlooked the hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who were working outside their homes. “*This crisis has certainly brought on a very difficult time for the poor*”, is all he mentioned. The same day, the labour ministry issued an “advisory” (an advisory is only an official announcement not an order mandated to be followed) to all states and union territories to transfer cess funds, collected into the labour welfare board, into the account of construction workers. According to the [press release](#) from the ministry, Rs 52,000 crore was available as cess fund with the Construction Welfare Boards to about 3.5 crore registered construction workers.

Every contractor is expected to register under the Building and Other Construction Workers Act, 1966 (BCOW). The Central Act, binding on builders and contractors, was enacted with the objective of ensuring the safety, security and regulating the working conditions of the workers. However, most builders and contractors evade registration of workers as it also entails payment of cess – one per cent of the cost of construction – towards workers’ welfare fund.

According to Telangana Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board, 16,09,204 workers have [registered](#) across 33 districts. 41% of the registered workers are women. Close to 90,000 workers are registered in Hyderabad alone. District with highest registration is in Khammam (1,65,127) followed by Nalgonda (1,12,496). Both Khammam and Nalgonda district have large numbers of brick kilns. The data was accessed on 12 July.

Labourers like Raju and especially his wife would remain way out of the radar of welfare from the Board. His labour contractor would have not even registered like the several others who bring labour from faraway places for construction activities.

If the labour contractor is from the workers’ state, he might show some accountability as he would have to face the wrath of the workers back home, but if he is from the destination state, as in the case of Raju, little sympathy can be expected. Most contractors are aware that the workers would hardly venture out of their work site to file any complaint against him at the police station or with the labour department.

Abandoned and Desolate

Raju saw panic-stricken faces all around him. Those around him were from Madhya Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Uttar Pradesh, Jharkhand and West Bengal. But with no public transport, including buses and trains, and no contractor in sight to pay them an advance or any shops open to buy provisions, the people had the only option of hitting the road on their foot.

They soon ran out of ration they purchased from the advance provided by the contractor. With shops also ordered to be closed, basic rations were sold at a high price. As their cash dwindled and the contractor now refused to answer their phone, Raju packed his meagre belongings and decided to trek back the 700 km from Hyderabad to Budbudha in Balaghat. They were a total of 26 members, including 15 women and four children, with the youngest being 1.5 years old and the oldest 3.5 years old.

“It will take us about 10 days to reach, but at least we will reach home and face the difficulties together with the family” said a determined Raju. He needs to be back to his other family members including his elderly parents, he said.

The two sets of lockdown – Janta Curfew and the sudden lockdown extended until 14 April – made one thing clear to Raju and several other labourers: the government was unsure how to deal with the situation and most certainly, the government was either unaware of the plight of the workers or did not consider them important enough to ensure their safe return home or make satisfactory arrangements at their work places. The lack of clarity and uncertainty, as extension of the lockdown was usually declared on the last day of the lockdown only, strengthened Raju’s determination to leave the city and return to their home at the earliest.

They could take only one mode of transport, their most trusted source – their two feet. An exodus of students and migrant workers had begun to find their way back home. Some by hiring vehicles procuring permissions, many, especially migrant workers, took to foot. Interstate borders had been sealed making crossing over the border extremely difficult as police check posts stopped vehicles from passing through.

Raju and the 26 others who set off late in the morning hours of 28 March walked about 10 kilometres on the NH 44 when they were accosted by the police in Kompalli. The March sun shone mercilessly making each step for the 3-year-old girl difficult, forcing Raju to keep her on his shoulders and his pregnant wife to carry additional luggage. The return was not as easy as they had imagined. So when the police halted them and coerced them into ARM gardens, a marriage banquet hall on the highway, encouraging them to eat and rest before proceeding, the travellers allowed them to be ushered in.

Social distancing... What’s that?

It was only when they were inside that they saw hundreds of others like them scattered helplessly in groups with their luggage and children. They heard the gates being locked behind them by the police that ushered them in. The hall was massive with well-maintained gardens leading up the stairs to a large platform open from all sides with a tall roof to safeguard them from the sun or rain. Families with as little as a month-old baby lay sprawled under the shed. “Stay on here until some vehicle is found to send you all home”, they were promised by senior police personnel inside the banquet who was taking down their names. A group of volunteers associated with the Rashtriya Swyam Sevak Sangh (RSS), the ideological wing of the Union government ruling Bharatiya Janata Party, had arrived with vessels, gas cylinders and ration to cook rice and sambhar to provide to the 430 migrants who were kept locked inside the temporary shelter.

Women were being thrust forward with little children at toe whenever any “important” person reached the place in their vehicles, to plead for their departure. They were willing to walk but not be locked down in this manner. Despite food being provided and separate toilets and bath with running water for men and women, the only single appeal resonating amongst all was to let them return to their homes. A few young boys from Musheerabad, a suburb in Hyderabad, also found themselves locked inside. “With no work at the construction site, we can easily walk back home, but were stopped and brought here forcibly”, they complained.

Looking at the state of the banquet hall as people huddled around, the Prime Minister’s speech of 24 March, laying special emphasis on social distancing appeared hollow:

... opinion of experts has proved that there is only one way to effectively deal with Coronavirus – Social Distancing... Some people are under the delusion that social distancing is essential only for sick people.

It is wrong to make those assumptions.

Social distancing is necessary for each citizen, for each family, and for each member of the family.

Homecoming

Rumours were rife that the lockdown will continue beyond March or April, in fact even the policemen and other government functionaries who visited would casually mention “yeh to lamba chalega”. Raju noticed that several people were slipping out of the gates as the gates were deliberately left unguarded after the initial two days. His group of 26 members had little children, hence wary of taking the big risk of walking back home. He shelved the idea of walking back further as news of road accidents were pouring in. But the decision to take on their feet became inevitable under the given conditions.

As the numbers in the banquet hall dwindled, the voluntary agency that had come to give cooked food also wound up. Pleading the police to continue giving them food until the lockdown came to a nought. Finally, on 10 April, as the police guarded the front, the remaining 26 – 15 women and four children, with the youngest being 1.5 years old and the oldest 3.5 years old – slipped out from the back gate and began walking until they found some empty vans, lorries that were willing to take them a distance. Police could not intercept them as they carefully avoided police check posts. “Police never stopped anyone on foot, so we crossed a large distance on foot attracting less attention”, he said. “We would start every day at 3 AM, walk or take a vehicle if available until noon, then stopped on the outskirts, cooked food from the ration we carried with us, rested until 4.40 PM and began our walk again until midnight, rest and leave again the next morning at 3.”

Sticking to National Highway 44 that wound through several cities of Maharashtra, they entered Madhya Pradesh, his home state.

They were stopped and screened at Keolari, the border district between Seoni and Balaghat. That took them two days. “As we reached, there were already 150 labourers like us, all of who had reached from Hyderabad. Along with them our temperatures were also checked”, described Raju. “Once all were declared clear, the police arranged a vehicle to drop us at Budbuda Gram Panchayat where we were quarantined for five days at the government high school,” continued Raju. Describing the quarantine facility in the school where a doctor visited, Raju said that nearly 15-16 persons shared one room. Caution of social distancing was flung out of the window, so to speak. Though they were not given any bed to sleep on, “everybody used their own chatais”. They were given cooked food.

After five days Raju and his family were allowed to reach their home, one kilometre away but were cautioned to practice social distancing while at home, which, Raju said they were practicing. Although he reached home without any money, it’s this feeling of “sukun” (peace) of being home that they missed back there, said Raju.



Stripped of Dignity of Labour

(Randheer Kumar, Vaishali district, Bihar)

Main zindagi ka saath nibhata chala gaya ...

23-year-old Randheer Kumar (middle with handkerchief tied as mask) had started from Vaishali district of Bihar in the month of November 2019, along with eight other men – six young and two older men – to work in the city of Hyderabad. This is his fourth year with the same contractor who hails from the same district but settled now in Telangana having married a native woman.



Randheer was the youngest son in a family of four brothers and one sister all of whom were married. Randheer did not attend school at all. Situation was such that that any income was welcome, said Randheer. So when he was eight years old, he would accompany his father and elder brothers to their worksite. The income he earns is awaited back home, because his brothers carry the responsibility of their families, while he has to earn for his parents. Being single, his life had lesser cares. He could stay on for a year, earn and then return home perhaps during Diwali and return to work again.

Currently no one in his family owns any land. Many generations back, they had small pieces of land, he recollected, but the grandfathers sold it when they needed to. So finding work outside his village was unavoidable.

This season, the work was with [Meenakshi Group](#), a group run by family and friends, a leading 26-year-old construction firm in Telangana, with several projects in Hyderabad. Randheer and his eight friends were engaged in the construction of an IT Park behind an IKEA showroom. The work which began in 2018 was supposed to be completed in the coming two years. This was not Randheer's first visit to Hyderabad. "I used to work in the construction of that building", he said pointing to a tall building behind him.

The Construction industry, which includes industrial, residential and commercial buildings, as well infrastructure such as roads, highways, railway, power plants, airports and ports, contributes over 2.7 trillion rupees to the country's GDP. The year 2018-19 pegged the contribution from [construction sector](#) at about 8% in the secondary sector. In Telangana, the contribution of the [construction sector](#) to Gross State Domestic Product in 2017- 18 was 5% predicting [8.2%](#) growth in 2018-19. The young state threw open its doors to [attract industries](#) to set up their businesses. According to Telangana State Industrial Project Approval and Self-Certification System (TS-iPASS) Act, any enterprise with an investment of over Rs. 200 crore will get an approval within 15 days; if no approval comes through, then the company should consider the project deemed approved. In addition, officials responsible for its clearance, if failed to do so, would be penalised with Rs. 1,000 per day's delay. This came at the cost of [severe violation](#) of labour laws as well as fraudulent land dealings putting investors at risk. [Meenakshi builder](#) is no saint.

Randheer dealt with hard tangible stuff like iron rods, sand, cement, bricks. It did not matter what morality his builders held, so long he is able to get paid for his hard labour and he is able to send 10-12,000 rupees to his parents. There was no official rest day. "You take a rest day and you are marked absent from work and the day's wages are cut", he said.

The labour colony was at a low-lying area with a large corrugated sheet on the top, dividing every 10x10 feet room with a wall. Around 300 labourers – from Bihar, Jharkhand, West Bengal, Punjab and Chhattisgarh – worked there. A shed with blue tin sheet had been set up. Several people, which he later gathered were around 150, were staying in the place. He and his eight friends were allotted a room, which was barely 12 x 12, it had takhats (cot like structures) laid one against the other covering the entire room. At the other side of the entrance was a little space, which they used to squat to eat their meals.

The routine was to reach the workplace in a batch equipped with their orange coloured helmet at 8 in the morning. Every week each worker is handed over an amount Rs. 1,000/- as khuraki (allowance) to buy weekly ration. This would be of course deducted when the final settlement is done. Randheer earned wages of Rs. 400 per day.

False promises

On Saturday, 21 March, Randheer's contractor along with the managers and supervisor came to announce complete halt of all work on 22 March. As this got further extended until 31 March, their contractor assured them of payment until the 31 March. In fact, he paid up half of what they had worked so far. Confident, Randheer and several others waited for the work to begin again.

Randheer's contractor provided them with dry ration until 31 March, but as the lockdown extended further to 14 April, they could sense his reluctance, as he was unsure of having his accounts settled by the builder. He soon got messages in his WhatsApp of several labourers leaving by foot. Randheer and his friends began to panic.

The chief minister of Telangana made two important announcements on 22 and 23 March respectively – firstly food security card holders or white card holders issued by Telangana government will be given 12 kg of rice and 1,500 rupees as one-time support into their bank accounts and secondly, [wages for all casual and contract workers](#) including [agricultural workers and private industry workers](#) will be paid by their respective employer until 31 May.

This order completely overlooked migrant workers from other states who leave their food security cards at their homes for their families to collect the subsidised grains. As ration supply from their respective contractors stopped, most of the workers began to plan their move back home. However, with interstate borders sealed and no public transport allowed from 22 March onwards, the only option workers had was to take to their feet to return home. The government perhaps carried the illusion that the migrant workers (exact figures of whom are not available²) will be fed and looked after by the contractors/builders, paid until the lockdown is lifted and that the migrants will be happy to stay put without any work.

The Central government's "[advisory](#)" of 24 March to all state governments "to transfer funds in the account of construction workers through DBT mode from the Cess fund collected by the Labour Welfare Boards under the BOCW cess Act" had the Telangana government hurriedly put together the Telangana Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board on 31 March as it had not been revamped since its lapse in October 2018. It was unclear from the order how long the board will be operational.

The Central government's press note also revealed that about 3.5 crore construction workers were registered with the Board and a total of about Rs. 52,000 crore was available as cess fund. Civil society members in Telangana claimed that Telangana government has collected Rs. 1,201 crore as cess towards workers' welfare fund and has spent until December 2018 only Rs. 263 crore. As the exodus of migrants departing Telangana began, Telangana Chief Minister announced provision of 12 kg rice and 500 rupees cash for every migrant worker even if they do not have the ration card. Those who stayed back like Randheer hoped the short duration until 14 April will pass. Although his mother kept calling him twice every day asking him

² According to government website, 16,09,204 workers (men and women) are [registered](#) under the BCOW Act, however these figures could be underreported as contractors do not give the actual figure, secondly many construction and brick kilns operate illegally

to return, Randheer wanted to take money back. He was hoping that work would begin, as his contractor had promised, after 31 March.

Charity with conditions

The Chief Minister's announcement met with several glitches leading to several petitions filed in the High Court. In one petition, a white card holder was denied 1,500 rupees as he had not lifted grains with the card for the last three months; in another case the petitioner claimed the government had cancelled 8 lakh white ration cards therefore making them ineligible for the benefit. Migrants without ration cards were turned back after standing for hours in the long queue at the public distribution outlet. They hadn't brought their adhar card. Those who did get the rice, were extremely disappointed with the quality of rice. "As soon as we put the rice into the boiling water, it just melts to become a lump", claimed some of the young boys from Jharkhand who worked in a hotel.

In other instances, the Tehsildar who was responsible for ensuring the distribution of the ration, said "we have clear instructions to provide ration only to stranded workers". Those who have been brought in to work in Telangana by the contractor will be provided ration by the contractor. When the workers argued that the contractor is refusing to answer their phone or even visit them, the Tehsildar directed them to file complain with the local police. When this was also attempted, as in the case of workers engaged in Narsingi (a thriving real estate suburb in Gandipet Tehsil, 20 km from Hyderabad city), the Narsingi thana in charge sought the number of the contractor, spoke with him who said he has made all the necessary provisions to his workers and the matter was closed. When insisted the families are going hungry, the police directed them to Annapurna canteen 2 km from their worksite where cooked meal was being provided.

When enquired this might be a better option as this saves the time of women from cooking, the workers, including women, said the canteen provides only rice and sambar mixed together and they have not developed a taste for it yet. Further, food is provided twice a day – the first meal reaches them at 2 pm. "We are labourers and used to eating by 10 am to begin our work. 2 PM is too late for us", said Bhupend, a migrant from Chhattisgarh. What do we do with our children who want to nibble something every two hours? The workers lamented that they were dipping into their savings now as no weekly kharchi is being offered. Others said they were requesting families to send them money back to survive as they have been sending back whatever money they would get, waiting for the weekly kharchi to see them through the weeks.

One must acknowledge the feeding points through Annapurna Canteen benefitted a lot of people, especially migrants, homeless people and beggars. Telangana has a six-year history of running Annapurna centres, feed centres where hot cooked vegetable meals, primarily rice and sambar/dal and vegetable is served at Rs. 5 per meal. These centres, run in partnership with Akshya Patra Foundation of Hare Krishna Movement, were increased from 150 to 175 during the lockdown. The canteens were located at prime junctions. However, since the main meal was rice based, migrants from Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh found it difficult to sustain only with rice.

"We eat rotis, so rice both times does not suit us", said Randheer apologetically, who was from Bihar. In any case the canteen was not in the vicinity of his workers' camp.

Stripped of Dignity of Labour

The [Telangana High court directed](#) the government to provide the promised ration and money without any biometric verification of the card and went on to direct the government to extend the benefits to non-card holders as well.

Randheer, like most migrant workers, did not carry his ration card with him. The PDS cards are family cards that are normally left at home for the family to collect ration from their respective shops. Therefore, Randheer was not eligible for the ration. But Randheer and his eight friends managed to reach

out to a helpline set up by a voluntary group of individuals, and collected their ration of wheat flour, dal, oil, masalas etc. to last him for another two weeks. Randheer cringed at having to ask for food. He had never done this before.

By a matter of four hours, the government stripped workers who migrated to cities to work and earn their living of dignity, having to wait in long queues to receive their share of food in absence of which they would starve.

As the lockdown got announced beyond 30 April until 7 May, Randheer and his friends could not take the uncertainty any further.

Am I being turned into a Bonded Labourer?

This was not just about food now – Randheer felt they were being deliberately not allowed to go. His doubts were confirmed when Telangana government announced resumption of [construction activities](#) by 3 May (even before the official lockdown could be lifted). His family was frantic. Covid-19 cases in Telangana, especially GHMC (Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation) area were soaring. Covid-19 positive cases were [crossing 1000](#). Randheer's family asked him to abandon everything and come back home. No sooner the order for resumption of construction work was made, their contractor approached the workers to join work. By the first week of May, half the labour camp was empty. When they enquired about the payment for the lockdown period, it was brushed aside, instead asking them to join work, if they wanted their full payment.

Randheer did not want to return home with no money. With no work in April, he hoped to work for a month and leave. He had little choice, as he did not know how to return. With no public transport, he had the only option of waiting. He thus rejoined work, but the contractor never paid him fully.

Reports of angry workers losing patience with the governments were coming from across the country. As the news of lockdown 2.0 (until 14 April) was announced, coupled with [cancellation of regular trains](#) until 3 May, there was an outburst of anger. [Thousands gathered](#) outside Mumbai's Bandra station demanding trains. The police had a tough time dispersing the crowd. Less than a week back, thousands of migrant workers had revolted in Surat [resorting to rioting](#) and pelting stones at police in two different locations in Surat city of Gujarat state demanding to be allowed to return to their homes. Surat saw an upsurge of angry workers pouring onto the streets [once again on 5 May when](#) the lockdown got extended until 17 May.

Telangana too had its share of angry protests. On 29 April thousands working at an L&T worksite at IIT campus in Sangareddy district [protested](#) when they were asked to join for work while their payments since 22 March were withheld.

In Telangana, travel by train was completely chaotic. On 5 May, Telangana Chief Minister tweeted: "*All the migrant workers who registered their names at local police stations would be transported. Hon'ble CM requested migrant workers not to panic as all the necessary arrangements have been made. Instructed police officials to facilitate the migrant workers for the travel.*" Although the list of state nodal officers responsible for migrants' return was put out, the given phone numbers were either not responding or were constantly engaged.

Randheer rushed to his nearest police station, Raidurgam PS, to register his name. There was a massive rush and the police was chasing people out. When he reached a couple of days later, he was told the [registration is closed](#) as nearly 2.25 lakh workers had registered for Shramik trains, which were still not fully operational. Randheer, like several other workers, was in a fix. Now he did not care whether he is being paid or not, but wanted to leave in desperation. At one point when he got a chance to board the train with help from some voluntary agencies who gathered last minute vacant seats from the government, his contractor discouraged him to go promising him full payment, including for the lockdown period. The contractor was aware that the departure of one person meant ten others leaving with him, encouraging others to follow. Although they held back their payment, the workers were either revolting, if they were in a large unit, or simply leaving.

Fearing loss of work in the coming season, Randheer convinced the others to stay back to work. However, that changed their situation little. While they increased their days of presence, the money continued to be withheld. When a major fight broke out, the contractor and the manager of Meenakshi Builders disconnected their supply of electricity asking them to leave immediately. Aghast, Randheer reached out to the voluntary group that helped him with ration, who intervened so they get a place to stay until his return.

On 8 June he got a call from the voluntary organisation that four persons could be sponsored to fly back to Patna. Randheer and three of his friends scrambled not wanting to miss the opportunity and reached Patna on 9th night, where after screening they were sent to their village in Vaishali district to home quarantine for 14 days.

Lockdown – Health at Risk

Travails of being a migrant worker

Hemin got married when she was 19 years old. This took her from her village in Bhandara district in Maharashtra to a village in Kawardha district of Chhattisgarh. She had finished class 10 when her parents began looking for a suitable boy.

Manoj Joshi, with whom she tied the knot, is five years older than her. It is now two years since their marriage and she has learnt to adjust to her new family. Theirs was a landless family. With no regular source of income –



like a government job or a shop – Manoj’s only source of income was travelling to another town to work as an unskilled labourer to bring home money to run the household. His responsibility extended to his parents, his younger brother and now his wife. Manoj hardly attended school. Even if memories were far behind, no sooner was he in a position to lift heavy things, he was asked by his father to accompany him to work.

Travelling out of the village was like going to a fair. Mostly it is family and extended family that goes together – this not only proves economical but also gives a sense of security in new cities. Things had to be packed, his mother packed some cooking utensils. Everything else will be provided for, was the usual promise from the labour contractor. A room to live to be shared with a family of four to five persons, cooking space within the room, running water, electricity, separate bathrooms and toilets for each family. The first time Manoj accompanied his parents to a town in Gujarat, he was nervous. He liked the open space in his village, his house even had a separate room shared by him and his younger brother, and the kitchen was outside in the open and of course the vast expanse of rice fields. His family owned not an inch of land, but he had his thrill running through the fields with his friends. Gradually though, he got used to returning to his house every six months, to breathe in the fresh air of his village.

But life is strange, it even lets you get accustomed and gradually slip comfortably into the discomfort and find solace in it. To Manoj and others, even the thought of returning home for a few months was enough to overcome the gruelling work as a construction worker, which entailed working under the scorching sun of summer. He also felt a certain air of achievement when he would see his nieces and nephews and younger cousins run towards him with squeals of joy to receive some of the cheap toys he would have picked up from railway station/bus stand before boarding for his return. The occasional return to the village, usually after six or seven months or sometimes even after a year, brings in a strange hero worship and an aura of worldly wisdom. “Bade sahar se aaye hain, inhe to pata hi hoga”, (He has come from a big city, so he would be knowing it) would be the final word to succumb to his argument.

Getting street smart

A few became fluent in Hindi and, even if it had a tinge of heavily Chhattisgarhi accent, it helped connect better with the outside world. In fact, putting in a word or two of English to describe something or using

English numbers or time, gave a further edge. Being a little social, engaging with contractors especially in conversation boldly without feeling shy had its added advantage economically. It helped become the potential labour sub-contractor. The contractor, sitting far away from their villages, keeps an eye for such moles. With a little incentive, the man, usually it's a man, is ready to bring him desired numbers of labour from his village.

This is how Naushad Ali became a sub-contractor. It is Naushad who took Manoj, Hemin, Sukhwar (Manoj's mother) and Deepak (Manoj's younger brother) to Bangalore city in February this year. Naushad, a construction worker himself, was associated with one Padma Dudhi, a contractor from Odisha, for the last 3–4 years. Dudhi got a massive contract from [Hombale Constructions and Estates Private Limited](#), a leading construction company in Bangalore with operational revenue of [100-500 crore](#) in 2018-19. The construction of 14-storey apartment building would take at least four years. Naushad had been going every year to this site. Nearly 400 workers – 100 from Jharkhand, 250 from West Bengal and 100 from Chhattisgarh were engaged by several contractors to complete the massive apartment located in the heart of Bangalore.

Naushad was only a small-time contractor. He had managed to bring 15 labourers with him this year in February. He gets 10 rupees per day as commission from the wages of each labourer brought by him.

Minimum Wages short changed for Ease of Doing Business

Wages are fixed by the main contractor – 370 rupees for a skilled labourer, like a mason, 270 for an unskilled male labourer and 170 for an unskilled female labourer. A worker himself, Naushad too accompanied the group along with his wife and 5-year-old son.

Minimum wages in India vary from state to state, as labour falls within the concurrent subject, where in both the State and the Centre are competent to enact legislation. For instance, Karnataka set as minimum wages in the construction sector Rs. 350 – 385 (excluding the Variable Dearness Allowance or VDA) for an unskilled worker and 375 – 405 (excluding VDA) for a skilled worker. Further, with the Equal Remuneration Act, 1976 in place, it was assumed the female workers will enjoy gender parity in wage payment. This, of course, proved incorrect in the case of Manoj and his family. What happened subsequently is even more worrisome.

In 2017, the Centre brought in some major reforms in labour laws. The introduction of the Wage Code Bill by subsuming four existing important labour laws, such as the Minimum Wages Act (1948), Payment of Wages Act (1936), Equal Remuneration Act (1976), and Payment of Bonus Act (1965) was a significant step. It had the opportunity of introducing a national wage floor that would keep the states paying very low minimum wages under check and also introduce thorough timely review based on a set of criteria. By passing the bill, the Government of India not only diluted some of the critical provisions of existing laws, mentioned above, but even overlooked the recommendation by the expert committee, commissioned by Ministry of Labour and Employment. The Expert Committee had recommended Rs. 375 per day as minimum wage.³

When the Wage Code Bill was introduced, it was expected that a national minimum wage would ensure minimum decent wages to workers; however what was [passed](#) and approved in the parliament in July 2019, was an amount of Rs. 178 minimum daily wages, far below the recommended Rs. 375 per day by the Expert Committee. Rs. 178 works out to Rs. 4,628 per month. In fact, the 15th India Labour Conference had recommended Rs. 692 per day that works to Rs. 18,000 per month. India's ranking at the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business had to be [revamped](#). Managing minimum wages was the easiest thing.

This time when Naushad Ali suggested the place in Bangalore, Manoj jumped at the idea. Naushad was almost family and he trusted him. Hemin was already pregnant, in fact in her fifth month. If he works for

³ Report of the Expert Committee on Determining the Methodology for Fixing the National Minimum Wage, January 2019.

three months, he could bring back about 35,000 rupees, he calculated. This would help him see through the delivery and other expenses.

Hemin had no choice, “I will go wherever my husband takes me”. “Since all of us were together, including my mother, she would only be safer and secure among us, rather than be left behind,” intervened Manoj. “In any case, we have no other choice but to work as labourers to earn our living”, explained Manoj.

The worksite in Bangalore was good, shared Manoj. His family, including his wife and his mother stayed in one room. Hemin’s delivery was due in July and they had hoped to return to their village in May. Hemin did not have paid work, instead cooked for her family to make sure they were all fed well, rested well and started their work. However, 45-year-old Sukhowar, her mother-in-law, worked with the other women earning her wages. Together with his mother and brothers’ wages, Manoj calculated a Rs. 50,000. But the lockdown deflated his calculation.

The Janta Curfew declared on 22 March followed by lockdown 1.0 until 14 April began to take a toll on the family’s income. Although the contractor/builder was kind enough to provide all the 300 labourers with food and water, most migrants were weighed down with two worries: How can they sit around without any work – no work meant no pay – how will their families back home survive? What if there is any emergency back home? What if they are infected with Coronavirus? Moreover, as the lockdown began to be extended, the contractors stopped meeting them. With disappearing food stock and absence of their contractor, the workers began dipping into their savings.

When the Janta Curfew was imposed in Karnataka, the state reported [26 positive cases](#), including one death. As days went past, footfall of migrant workers returning to their home began to surge. News screens were flooded with images of young and old, men and women with their little children tugging behind them or hitched on to their shoulders balancing the luggage on the other shoulders making their way back to their far away homes in Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Madhya Pradesh and West Bengal.

Politics can be very foul. The government heard, watched and read stories of migrants walking on the road succumbing to fateful accidents, dying of starvation/dehydration, yet to show they cared for them and perhaps even to grab some limelight, on 1 May, International Labour Day, [Special Shramik trains](#) to take the migrants back to their homes was announced.

The announcement kindled hopes of return after nearly one-and-half months of no work. Over [2.13 lakh migrant workers in the Karnataka state](#) had registered to return home, however only 9,600 workers boarded the inter-state trains between 3 and 5 May. The departure of the workers pressed a panic button on various real estate projects in the State. On 6 May, succumbing to the pressure mounted by builders and real estate agents, the Karnataka Chief Minister, Yediyurappa [cancelled all the shramik special trains.](#)

His [announcement](#), soon after the cancellation of trains, of Rs. 1,630 crore Covid-19 relief package, which included financial assistance of Rs. 3,000 to each construction worker, held little sway over the workers. The aid, said the government will be made available to 1.58 million registered building construction workers in the state. “This is over and above the Rs. 2,000 that is already being transferred to their accounts”, said Chief Minister B S Yediyurappa in a tweet on Wednesday. The cancellation of trains invited [sharp criticism](#) from opposition, [outrage from labour unions](#), and the wrath of the migrant workers who [refused to resume work](#) but rather return to their homes. On the 8th, the Shramik Special trains were resumed.

Naushad Ali and his family, Manoj Joshi and his family stayed on hoping for the work to pick up. As governments were breaking their heads over whether to allow or disallow transport of migrant workers and whether to resume work, when the Humbale builders did resume construction work on 22 May, the labourers slipped from the labour camp and took to foot to reach their villages. Only 50 construction workers, including their group of 17 from Chhattisgarh, were remaining in the labour colony, informed Ali. While none of the amounts promised by the governments reached their bank accounts, what did reach through WhatsApp shares was the mounting number of Covid-19 cases in the state of Karnataka and more particularly in Bangalore where they were working. As on 22 May, the [state recorded](#) 1,743 positive cases and 41 Covid-19 deaths.

As the lockdown continued to be extended indefinitely for a period of two weeks, Manoj began to feel nervous about his wife's condition. They had already made several visits to a private doctor nearby the worksite as she had pangs of pain a couple of times. A sonography check relieved them of her condition but the visits and check-ups bore a large hole in their pocket. Their savings were already down by 10 to 12 thousand rupees. With no public transport and no work, there was nothing they could do but wait. The entire month of April got them no work, which meant no payment. The Builder got them 5 kg rice and one kg dal for the month of April. "This hardly lasted two days", said Manoj. With additional expenditure on Hemin's condition, he requested his father and his in-laws to send them money to support their indefinite stay. The ten thousand rupees they received from various family members helped them until they departed on 28 May.

With no trains running and the lockdown further [extended until 31 May](#), Manoj and others frantically explored ways to return. Manoj, his pregnant wife Hemin, along with 17 others, including Ali and his family left in the morning of 28 May and proceeded to the highway in Hebbal. The highway was about 40 km from their worksite. The only option was to walk. After walking for 5-6 hours they reached the highway, where they found a tempo that was willing to drop them at Telangana border. All the 17, including 8-month pregnant Hemin, crammed inside the tempo. Getting off the check post, they began to walk again happy they managed this far to inch closer to their homes. After walking for three hours, they met people engaged in road construction work. Some of the supervisors took pity, especially after seeing a pregnant woman walking. They arranged a vehicle to drop them at a banquet hall on the Telangana-Nagpur road.

The hall was filled with over 300 migrants sprawled all over the place.

With the exodus of the migrants surging from suburban Hyderabad, several voluntary organisations had set up pandal for workers to rest and providing cooked food for them to eat, several also raised funds to organise buses or flag down trucks to negotiate price to take them to their destination. If there were pregnant or breastfeeding women, members negotiated with Women and Child Department to arrange buses for them to their destination.

Hemin Joshi with her obvious baby bump was pushed in the forefront to seek vehicle. Since a bus was already organised for two pregnant women who were proceeding along with a group of 30 other members to Chhattisgarh, the 17 from Bangalore joined too. They were further joined by few others who happened to arrive from other places.

A total of 70 passengers left that night by bus. The caution for social distancing was given a sweeping throw out of the window. Nothing mattered then, other than reaching home to their family.

Dry snacks were given by some good Samaritans and they finally reached their Chhattisgarh border in Rajnandgaon district the next morning.

At the border they were screened for fever. Once they reached their gram Panchayat in district Kawardha, three persons were randomly checked for Covid-19. Once they found them negative, they were directed to the Panchayat school to be quarantined for 14 days. Hemin was taken to a closeby Kanya Ashram shala (girls residential school) that had better facilities of bedding and food.

On 8 July Hemin delivered a baby boy. The trauma of her visit to Bangalore and back took a toll on Hemin who had to undergo a caesarean as her baby was breech (*not in the head-first position for delivery*). Thus adding a heavier dent to their financial situation.

Conclusion

When contacted, all the three were in the safe confines of their homes, but staring at an utterly bleak future.

Raju Rekhele heads every morning to reach Tehsil headquarter, Waraseoni, at a distance of 15 km from his house. Two days back – after a gap of sitting idle for three-and-half months – he found this work. Closer to home, his wages as a skilled labourer (Mason) is reduced to less than half of what he got in Hyderabad (he gets here Rs. 300). Although he has not received any information of work from other states, he fears venturing out now. “Once things settle down, I can still consider”, he said. Kavita due to her pregnancy will not be working – a decision taken by the family. Women labourers get half (Rs. 150) within the district as compared to Rs. 300 women get in Telangana.

Raju’s family does not hold any ration card. Despite his survival as a circular migrant worker, the Sarpanch has put him in the category of rich person, thereby denying him the PDS card – yellow/pink/white. Not having a Below Poverty Line (BPL) card, discredits his wife or his mother to be beneficiaries of Pradhan Mantri Ujjwala Yojana, a scheme that grants free gas cylinder until September.

Raju is unaware if his contractor has registered them under the BOCW Act; in any case he has not received any amount from the state wage board as announced by the government. A onetime deposit of Rs. 500 was made into the Jan Dhan account of Kavita.

His gram Panchayat has not opened any MGNREGS work, thus no labour is available in the near vicinity. His worry for the future was palpable. Kavita’s pregnancy has restricted her labour work; her delivery will cost money too. If he wishes to keep his daughter in school, he would have to restrict both his and his wife’s movement to other cities, which means looking for work nearby which is not well paid.

Randheer, though with lesser cares and responsibilities, sounded as defeated. With no job on hand, the situation at home is extremely shaky.

Since he has had scuffles with the current contractor, he knows he will never approach him again for work. No new contractor has further approached him with work. Given the rise in Covid-19 cases in Bihar, he is wary of venturing out again lest he gets stranded once again.

Randheer too denied having any ration card, therefore outside the radar of Ujjwala Yojana. His sister had a deposit of Rs. 500 twice into her Jan Dhan Account. Beyond this, he has got no money from the Wage Board. No MGNREGS in his gram Panchayat, hence no work generated and therefore no income. He spends his time hanging around with friends, spends a great deal of time on his phone and waiting for any contractor to take him for work. Randheer too is waiting for some contractor to approach him so he can take off to work, but he is afraid of leaving his village lest he gets stranded again.

Manoj and Hemin sounded in extremely dire situation. Hemin’s delivery has not only dug a hole into their savings, but also the debt incurred during Hemin’s pregnancy throws an additional responsibility over the family. Although he waits for work, he fears going out. The fear of staying away from home is too high on him.

This will be quite a year to tide over for families of people like Raju, Randheer and Manoj. The migrant workers need both food grain support as well as a regular cash support for the next six months. This cash support could be under the MGNREGS in their gram Panchayat which needs to be raised to at least 200 days. The wages should be distributed promptly on a weekly basis. A robust system to plug in any form of corruption should be put in place. If this is undertaken in the sincerest manner, there are chances of people restoring their faith in governance.