



COVID19 Pandemic Voices from Margins

Webinar series Webinar 3:

Interstate Migrants in Tamil Nadu

Date: April 15, 2020

Minutes

PANELLIST PROFILE

1. Deepali, married at the age of 16 had an extreme financial crisis which made her take up the idea given by an eldest in her village to migrate. Deepali, along with her husband Rajan, moved from Cuttack district of Odisha to Tamilnadu in search of survival. She is working as a fabric finisher at Perundurai, Erode for past one year.

2. Kavitha is a native of North Twenty-Four Parganas, West Bengal. When her husband found a vacancy in the textile factory he works at in Erode, she joined as a helper. As a helper, she earns Rs.7500/-per month. For the past 2 years, she has been working with the commitment to support her family. It is the interaction with other migrant workers is her only consolation now.

3. Rabin Sardar works as a helper in a textile unit at Erode. From Sandeshkhali, North 24 Parganas, West Bengal with the support of his uncle working in a mill at Tiruchengode Rabin Sardar joined as a helper in the manufacturers of clothes and fabrics. For the past 2 years, he is working in the mill for the wage of Rs 12000/- per month. With this minimal salary, he feeds his family and takes care of his parents too. Despite the lack of PF and other provisions, Rabin states he would continue his labour for subsistence.

Mr Tom Thomas, Moderator, Praxis: Praxis is an Indian organisation that focuses on various facets of participatory democracy. Praxis tries to bring the voices, concerns and solutions of marginalised communities through several kinds of research and studies directly or through face to face meetings that happen physically or digitally between the community members, policymakers, media, activists etc., This webinar series of COVID-19 Pandemic – Voices from Margins is a continuation of that attempt as during the lockdown days the major hope is to bring to the forefront the voices of the communities that are left unheard. This webinar is also a reminder to us that even in the global crisis, how blatantly inconsiderate towards human rights; right to life and dignity. During today's session, we will be bringing the voices of interstate migrant workers in Erode and Tiruppur and their families that depend on the meagre wages that the migrants remit back home.

Karupasamy, Director of READ organisation: Tamil Nadu is known for hosting an increasing number of interstate migrants in the garments and textile industry. These migrants are majorly from the states of Odisha, Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal, Madhya

Pradesh and other parts of South India. These interstate migrants form the supply chain for Erode, Salem, Karur, Coimbatore, Namakkal, Dindigul and Tirupur, the seven districts that form the textile hub. Tamil Nadu has registered under industries and supply chain sheltering around 7,413 factories. Interstate migrants move either individually or with the family through a skill training centre, relatives and friends. Wage is the biggest issue in this lockdown period next to social distancing in the residence (hostel) provided. Petition to provide the basic amenities and essentials for health & sanitation is submitted to District Collector of Erode and Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu for the identified 2,320 family in 10 settlement area. Though officials visited the settlement area no signs of welfare measures witnessed in the vicinity. To withstand the lack of income many have got advance and loans which they have to repay once the lockdown lifted. The survey depicts that more than 40% lack PF provisions; more than 80% are in the immediate requirement of food and shelter.

PANELLISTS DISCUSSION

Deepali: I am from Cuttack, Odisha. There is lockdown there. I work to feed my family. Since lockdown, there has not been any work. We are going through a period of trouble and managing in some way. I work in Erode in a mill. Since the lockdown, the factory has shut down. We don't have any money, and cannot spend on food. All these problems are there. There are 50 rooms here. All of us are facing the same problem of not having any money. We hope there will be some help for us. That is our expectation here. Even at home, people eat if we are able to work and if we don't work, there is no food. But now with the lockdown, we have not had work. There is not much food they have. They are managing with the ration that they have received. I usually earn money here and send home. But now, with lockdown, I am not earning anything. What will I send? We have not got any assistance from the company since lockdown. The NGO gave us 10kg rice. That is what we are surviving on.

Kavitha: I come from Sandeshkhali. We work here in Tamil Nadu (Erode as a helper in a garment factory), but since lockdown, we don't have any money. What we got, we have spent in the last two weeks. We live in a room on rent. All of us are facing the same problem. We got 10 kg rice from the school (run by READ). And we got our salary for the few days that we worked. We are managing in that money. This will last us for another two days or so. After that, I wonder how we will manage. This is not just our problem, this is the same problem that all of us face. We hope there will be some relief from all of you. We hope the government also helps us in some way. We have not received anything from the government so far.

Rabin: My house is in Kolkata, West Bengal. Our house is in Sandeshkhali thana. We are all working here to make our ends meet. We have migrated this far for work. We don't have any land. My father is 65 years old. My mother is 59. They are old. We work here and support them. We have demands from the government. To tell you about the work we are doing. We received our wages for the 17-odd days we worked in March. That is what we are using to survive on. In terms of support, my children study in a school here (the school is run by the NGO READ). The school gave us 10 kg rice and some pulses and oil. We were making do with that and with the wages we got. What will happen once this runs out, we don't know. The company did not help in any way. There are many kinds of people here, from Assam, Jharkhand, Odisha, from Kolkata, Bihar, all of us are here. There are 50 rooms here. Some people have taken loans, some people have pleaded for support from people they know. In

some houses, the children are getting just one meal a day. There are many here who are surviving on just one meal a day. We also have to buy water at the rate of Rs 40 per day. We are in a lot of trouble. Only the government can help us. We are in a very bad situation. We heard you are speaking to people like us and might help us. It is not just me. I am talking about all of us. We are all poor people here. We have not really approached the company. We work as helpers. We were told once the lockdown is lifted, we would have work. We don't have the luxury of support from the company. We told the manager, can't you help us. He said the employers would have to take some decision first. We told them the problem now, how can you say you will help us later. We need help now. Then he didn't respond to me.

Ashis Behera, New Hope India: A survey was conducted in 6 villages with 22 families of migrant workers. Out of those who were interviewed 19 were male members and 3 were female, 20 were Dalits and 2 belonged to general category. Out of 22 surveyed – 21 has received PDS facility, the 1 member who did not receive was not present in the village at that time. All the 22 people have received money under Jan Dhan Yojana. 15 of them are aware of Ujjwala Scheme and 7 are linked whereas 5 of them have been benefitted. 22 of them have MGNREGA card but have not received any work. When asked about how are they managing? The family shared that the migrant members of the family require money and have been asking the family to send them money. The government has asked the authorities to pay the full salary however they have not yet received any money. They said they are going to speak to the authorities for the same. When asked if they have already taken loans? They shared we have not yet taken loans; they said they are managing with the money they have. When asked if they have been able to send money to the migrant members of their family? They said the family is already suffering due to lockdown; they do not have any source of livelihood. They are facing difficulties for managing with their daily needs so it is very difficult for them to send money to those migrant members. They said they have received support only from the government bodies no other bodies have helped them. Only for dinner, they have a decent meal.

Umi Daniel, Aid et Action: Certain key issues need to be addressed by the policymakers. First, it is essential to get a realistic picture of the interstate migrants to plan accordingly. While Kerala has acknowledged 35lakh migrants in the state, Tamil Nadu says 5 lakh migrants only from construction which shows the under-reported stranded labours. The state claims to provide 260 relief camps and supports over 50,000 migrant families. Second, we don't have any task force to manage the upcoming movement of migrants in stage two of lockdown. It is significant to ponder upon how the source areas like West Bengal, Jharkhand prepared to tackle the unemployment with returning migrants. Advocacy on post lockdown support to the migrants, psycho-social needs and their employment should be considered as the significant part of the economy runs through the labour of migrant workers.

Q&A SESSION:

QUESTION: How many children does she have and are they with her? Is there any physical distancing where she is staying? Did she attempt to go back home?

RESPONSE (Deepali): I don't have any children. Other migrant's children are staying with us in this school. It is hard for us to maintain social distance in a given space. We want to go back to our houses, we don't have money, trains are not plying. How will we go? I would like

to tell the Odisha government we are having problem in feeding ourselves, finding work, we would like the government to provide us with the support to deal with these issues.

QUESTION (Bharti Birla): Where was she working and other 50 workers he mentions? in a formal enterprise? Was she a regular worker, casual/daily wage/piece rate?

RESPONSE: All of them are working in the garment sector: Deepali works as a fabric finisher. Kavitha and Rabin are working as helpers in a dyeing unit of a garment factory.

QUESTION (Priya): Has there been any help from the employer?

RESPONSE (Rabin): I got paid for 15-16 days I worked in this month. The manager told us after lockdown we will get our jobs back, but not the salary for April. Other than that there is no assurance or PF provision.

WAGE & BANKING

QUESTION (RAHUL SAPKAL): How are they remitting the money? Either through a mobile wallet or any other sources? Since the banks work only for two hours and ATM's are out of cash

RESPONSE (Rabin): Since lockdown, we didn't earn anything to send it back to home.

QUESTION: Also, the money transferred to the Jan Dhan Accounts, do these migrant workers can access the amount, financial literacy being a challenge? Are all of these Jan Dhan accounts even operational?

RESPONSE: The details of the Jan Dhan account is shared in findings by Ashish as well as the survey report. Do share your email ids, so we can share the details on that.

GOVT & WELFARE SCHEMES

QUESTION (Ileana Roy) Are they all carrying their ration cards with them or is it back at their homes in Odisha? I am keen on understanding the implementation of welfare measures.

RESPONSE (Clement David): There is a need for the government to Open a web portal linked with a multi-lingual call centre to coordinate the service providers and migrant labourers who are in need. This needs to be widely publicized. This will bridge the gap btw migrant labourers who are in need to be shifted to relief camps. The relief camps can be run in coordination with Employer Associations such as TASMA, SIMA, CREDAI, Civil Society Volunteers, UN Aid Agencies that help during Disaster Relief. This needs to be advocated with the government likewise for the National Taskforce for migrants.

QUESTION: Any support for the migrants from the Odisha Govt.?

RESPONSE: Umi has raised an important issue of the National Task Force. From ILO, we have also brought it to the notice of Odisha. Just wanted to bring to your notice that in 2012/13 - An Inter-State Migration Coordination Cell was set-up under the Chair of DGLW, Ministry of Labour. It will be good to activate the cell. The Cell has a membership of Labour Commissioners of sending and receiving states. Odisha is standing out as supportive AT DESTINATION. We have come across examples of kitchens and ration distribution in Haryana's Manesar, which go only to Oriya workers so that other workers feel left out.

EMPLOYEE & BRANDS:

QUESTION: How do you all see the responsibility of the international brands that source from Tirupur and Erode district? What can we do in Europe to support the situation of migrant workers in TN?

QUESTION (Mclaud Emmanuel): How do we advocate Brands and Human Rights Commissions to be more vigilant post lockdown as the demand for labour escalates and there is potential for rising debts and potential for bonded labour and human trafficking for labour?

RESPONSE (Orlanda): Given the facts that there are many ways for gov to reach the migrants through Jan Dhan account, Aadhar, Provident fund and employers etc. International Brands can push forward by utilizing the available social platforms and campaigning. As for now, the Brands can increase the pressure the employer to retain the workers with full employment without lay off on a huge scale is not found.

RESPONSE (Karupasamy): Government has passed the order to pay the full salary whereas the workers are paid only for the days they worked. Central and state have funds allocated for interstate migration which need to be utilised effectively and efficiently to reach national wide. It is significant to have a regular follow up on the measures.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY-LEVEL CHANGES

Stanley, Partners in Change: We have been using this webinar platform to bring the ground level voices from different communities. The worst affected are migrant workers who are stranded, homeless, and hungry who do not fear Coronavirus but starvation. Next comes the daily wage workers. The unorganized sector is worst-affected and this will double after the lockdown gets over. Moreover, they lack social security net. The May 1 webinar will be jointly hosted by Praxis, PiC, IWG-FF and TNA. Lot of work, research and rapid studies being done by different organizations. This will give insights towards planning interventions post lockdown. How bad it has affected migrants, unorganized workers, home-based workers (includes garments, bidi workers) and contract labourers especially from marginalized communities? How Adivasis and Dalits are affected? What textile industries and associations thinking post lockdown? What are the recommendations from civil society groups? What are the priorities of government during a lockdown? How is the garment supply chain coping with the COVID? We are trying to bring people from margins, industry associations, trade union representatives. Please join a special meeting on 1st May (Friday) i.e international labour day.

Resources shared during the webinar:

1. Book published titled "Borders of Pandemic" on migrant workers and COVID-19 https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oZ0Wu8zJG1ImCrYkSSS-0U_C0B-taGF3/view?usp=sharing
2. https://labour.gov.in/sites/default/files/Central_Government_Update.pdf
3. <https://gethuworkers.wordpress.com/archives/>
4. <https://www.outlookindia.com/website/story/opinion-covid19-lockdown-and-the-rise-of-bonded-labour-and-human-trafficking-in-india/350662>
5. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/govt-plans-changes-in-law-to-allow-12-hr-shifts-in-factories/story-eODI0qrWT6p757VMRPSqTP.html>

6. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/01/opinions/coronavirus-law-enforcement-asia-intl-hnk/index.html>

7. <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/governance/one-nation-one-ration-card-and-the-hurdles-ahead-65615>

8. <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/01/opinions/coronavirus-law-enforcement-asia-intl-hnk/index.html>

For more information on the on-ground work in Tiruppur, contact read.erode@gmail.com;
For more details on Praxis, Partners in Change or the Voices from Margins series, contact anushac@praxisindia.org and stanley@picindia.org.

All recordings and minutes of the Webinar are available on <http://praxisindia.org/covid19.php>

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