

Survey of Migrant Workers in Distress in Delhi under COVID-19 Lockdown

Members of the Delhi State units of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) have been working tirelessly over the past few weeks to provide relief material to a large number of migrant workers stranded in the NCR region. The contacts of CITU leaders in Delhi were passed on to workers in distress, and within a few days, these numbers were shared among many hundreds of workers who in turn passed them on to other workers stranded here in Delhi. Over the last month, the CPI(M) and CITU activists involved in relief work in Delhi have received innumerable calls from workers in distress. Until April 23rd, around 20,000 migrant workers were contacted and given direct relief by the Party and the CITU in Delhi in the form of food kits which included foodgrains, edible oil, salt, sugar, soap.

Along with providing directly relief, it was also necessary to get all these details to also assist workers to access the COVID relief programmes of the Delhi Government. It was found that many of these workers did not have ration cards, many did not have AADHAR cards. Many of these workers did not have enough money even to recharge their mobile phones. To make it easier for themselves, different groups of workers gave the name of one contact telephone number, a sort of group head who coordinated the relief work for that group.

It was in this context that it was decided to conduct a survey of the workers in contact with us through relief work so that some information could be collected about them and assistance could be provided to them so that they can access the COVID relief programmes of the Delhi government. For the purpose of this survey, a questionnaire was prepared and a team of 40 volunteers was organised to telephonically conduct the survey. This telephonic survey was conducted with the 506 "group leaders" representing 8870 workers between April 10 and 18, 2020. Some of the respondents were living with individual families. For the purpose of this survey, individual responses of the contacts were noted, however, in the analysis of the data we could make some projections for the entire population of stranded people who approached for relief, since they were banded together in terms of similar employment, work and earnings. This survey doesn't cover construction workers and rag-junk-scrap collectors though the CITU could reach out relief to them.

The volunteers involved in the survey reported acute anxiety among most of those to whom they spoke. A question which haunted many was, when would they be able to go home. Another was the worry about not having work or earnings, the inability to pay rent, and the haunting fear of hunger. The volunteers themselves, many of whom were students spoke of how they had sleepless nights and a constant feeling of worry over the plight of the workers.

Here are the findings of the survey:

Out of the total 506 respondents, 44 per cent belonged to West Bengal (Table 1). Within the migrant workers from West Bengal, majority belonged to North Dinajpur and Malda districts. Migrant workers coming from Bihar formed second largest proportion of respondents at 32 per cent. Forty per cent of the migrant worker respondents from Bihar belonged to Sitamarhi district. There were 72 migrant worker respondents from Uttar Pradesh. We also recorded responses of two Nepali migrant workers. A group of 40 migrant workers from Kashmir, many self- employed sellers of textiles and other handmade products were also in touch and were provided relief.

Table 1: *State of origin of respondents*

States	Number of respondents	Percentage
Assam	1	0.2
Bihar	162	32.0
Delhi	29	5.7
Jammu and Kashmir	1	0.2
Jharkhand	4	0.8
Madhya Pradesh	3	0.6
Nepal	1	0.2
Odisha	1	0.2
Rajasthan	2	0.4
Uttar Pradesh	72	14.2
Uttarakhand	2	0.4
West Bengal	222	43.9
Unspecified	6	1.2
Total	506	100

Table 2 provides the distribution of respondents according to their present location. More than half the respondent, which is 58.5 per cent, are currently residing in neighbourhoods of East Delhi. These highly distressed localities include Gandhi Nagar, Ajeet Nagar, Old Seelampur, Raghubarpura, Shakarpur. This is an area known as one of the largest garment and cloth bag producing centres in North India comprising mainly of small and medium enterprises. With the lockdown, everything has closed down and no salaries have been paid. Apart from workers who have lost their jobs, thousands of women also get outsourced work from these small units such as cutting threads on garments. The lockdown has also put an end to all this home based work income, mainly done by women. A separate survey for home based work will also be done.

We also received calls for relief from Gurgaon, Ghaziabad, Noida and Haryana.

Table 2: Distribution of respondents by present residence

NCR Districts	Number of respondents	Percentage
East Delhi	296	58.5
South Delhi	43	8.5
Gautam Buddha Nagar	42	8.3
North East Delhi	40	7.9
Central Delhi	21	4.2
North Delhi	15	3
South West Delhi	14	2.8
North West Delhi	11	2.2
Ghaziabad	8	1.6
South East Delhi	7	1.4
Gurgaon	3	0.6
Haryana	2	0.4
New Delhi	2	0.4
West Delhi	1	0.2
Unspecified	1	0.2
Total	506	100

Majority are Casual Workers:

The survey brings out the insecurity of work for the migrants. Only 28 per cent had monthly paid jobs. Of all the respondents covered in the

survey, a majority worked as casual workers. About 35 per cent worked on piece-rated contracts and 23 per cent were daily-paid workers. This means that for 58 per cent of workers there is no guarantee for them of the number of days of work they can get. In such a situation it is clear that most of them would have no savings to fall back on. This is the main reason for the desperation we have seen of migrant workers wanting to go home. About 13 per cent respondents were self-employed, and in their case with very fluctuating incomes.

Table 3. Type of employment of respondents

Type of work	Number of respondents	Per cent
Self-employed	66	13
Work for monthly wages	140	28
Work for daily wages	116	23
Work for piece-rated wages	177	35
Unemployed	7	1
Total	506	100

In terms of occupations, the largest group (198 respondents, 39 per cent) was of people working as tailors. This included people who were self-employed, people working in small tailoring shops, people working as tailors in garment enterprises, as well as home-based workers (either self-employed or working for contractors). Within the general trade of garment workers, a large number of these workers are embroiderers doing intricate work on garments. It requires extreme concentration but the earnings are meager. Casual manual workers constituted about 16 per cent of all respondents. Technicians and skilled workers constituted 7 per cent of respondents. Factory workers (apart from tailors in garment factories) constituted about 8 per cent of respondents. About 7 per cent of respondents were street vendors or self-employed persons who did manual work.

Table 4. *Occupations of respondents*

Occupations	Number of respondents	Per cent
Tailoring	198	39
Embroidery workers	22	4
Miscellaneous casual manual labour (daily/piece-rated)	83	16
Factory workers (miscellaneous)	39	8
Monthly-paid manual workers	28	6
Technicians (mechanics, electricians) and other skilled workers (carpenters, masons)	37	7
Domestic worker	7	1
Home-based worker	5	1
Rehri/Street vendor, and other self-employed manual work	35	7
Auto/E-rickshaw driver	10	2
Small business	10	2
Private salaried job (non-manual)	22	4
Others/Unclassified/Non-workers	10	2
Total	506	100

Low Incomes

As far as income is concerned, it is really shocking how low the income is compared to the work done. Four per cent of respondents had monthly income less than Rs. 5000 and about 52 per cent of the respondents covered in the survey had incomes (before the lockdown) between Rs. 5000 and Rs. 10000 per month. Another 35 per cent had incomes between Rs. 10000 and Rs. 15000. (Table 5) .With such low incomes the quality of life of these migrant workers is extremely difficult in a city like Delhi where the cost of living is so high. Because of high rents, most workers live together in small rooms sharing the rent. These are mostly in buildings with little ventilation, water scarcity and poor sanitation.

Yet in spite of such poor earnings, sacrificing their own needs, many workers sent a substantial portion of their earnings to support their families back home. Yet as many as 27 per cent were too poor to do that. One can imagine the plight today of those 27 per cent respondents who could not send any remittances back. This is a substantial number. It means that a large number of migrant workers in a city like Delhi earn just about enough to survive themselves. This lockdown is most

devastating for this section.(Table 6). Most of the others sent a significant part of their incomes to their dependents in their villages. As shown in Table 7, on average, respondent sent about a third of their incomes - in most cases, between Rs. 2000-Rs.8000 per month -- to their dependents in the village.

Table 5. Proportion of respondents by monthly income class

Income class	Number of respondents	Per cent
<=5000	18	4
5000-10000	255	52
10000-15000	172	35
>15000	43	9
Average	Rs. 11394	

Note: Data on income was not recorded for 18 respondents.

Table 6 Proportion of migrant worker respondents by the monthly remittances sent to dependents in native place

Monthly remittance class	Number of respondents	Per cent
Zero	107	27
<=2000	49	12
2000-4000	58	14
4000-6000	97	24
>6000-8000	59	15
>8000	31	8
	401	100
Average	Rs. 4015	

Note: 76 respondents could not provide information on amount of remittances, mostly because of irregularity.

Table 7. Average share of income sent as remittances, migrant worker respondents (per cent)

Income class	Percentage of income sent as remittances
<=5000	11
5000-10000	31
10000-15000	39
>15000	33
All respondents	34

Food Insecurity

Respondents were asked about the present status of available essential rations. Table 8 provides status of availability of rice, atta, pulses and cooking oil with the respondents. It was found that 29 per cent of the respondents did not have any rice, while the proportion was 51 per cent, 52 per cent and 54 per cent for atta, pulses and cooking oil respectively. For the others, we calculated the average per head (on the total stranded population) availability of these food items, which turned out to be an abysmal quantity. This signifies the near starvation levels of majority of workers and their families.

Table 8: *Status of ration stocks*

	Rice	Atta	Pulses	Cooking oil
No stock	147 (29 %)	257 (51 %)	263 (52 %)	274 (54.2 %)
Average per head	0.65 kg	0.3 kg	0.2 kg	0.13 litres

The survey found that 330 or 65 per cent of the respondents had not received any form of government food support, either in the form of dry rations or cooked meals. And of the 176 respondents who received food support from the government, 120 reported that the amount was inadequate.

Six per cent of the total respondents did not have either a ration card or an AADHAR card. On projecting this percentage on the total number of people in the groups (8314) of workers that the survey covered, about 500 persons neither had a ration card nor an AADHAR card. These people were ineligible for the Delhi government's policy of providing dry ration support during the period of the lockdown only to those who either had a ration card or at least an AADHAR card. The rest are expected to go to food kitchens. But those who have temporary rented places in Delhi would much prefer dry rations but without these documents, they suffer.

Of the total number of respondents almost one fourth, 22.5 per cent (114 people) did not have a bank account. It was further found that 3.5 per cent of the respondents didn't have a ration card, AADHAR card or a bank account. On projecting it on the total number of people in the groups, this would stand at 291 persons. These people then are ineligible for any direct Government support through the Public Distribution System or Direct Bank Transfer. Relief for this section of

migrant workers and their families could only be provided through direct delivery of dry ration to them.

Conclusion:

The large number of migrant workers are in unstable and vulnerable employment. Their earnings are meagre. They sacrifice their own basic requirements, living in terrible conditions to send help for their families back in their villages. Yet there are no regular Government surveys of migrant workers. They are the “nowhere” people not figuring in any policy framework. Lakhs of them live in Delhi and millions of them across the country. One of the stark realities brought out by the lockdown is the callous ignorance of policy makers sitting in the Central Government towards migrant workers, reflected in the absence of any relief measures for them and their families. This survey gives us a glimpse in concrete terms of some aspects of this reality. In the coming days, the Party and the CITU in Delhi will take the survey work further to build struggles for the rights and for the dignity of these workers.